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**WORDS, WIGS AND VEILS  
MODEST RELIGIOUS DRESS AND GENDERED ONLINE IDENTITIES**

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# **WORDS, WIGS AND VEILS: MODEST RELIGIOUS DRESS AND GENDERED ONLINE IDENTITIES**

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**Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies, September 2016**

## **Abstract**

### **Words, Wigs and Veils: Modest Religious Dress and Gendered Online Identities**

In this thesis, I explore how Muslim and Jewish women in a predominantly North American cultural context use online public spaces to blog about their religious dress practices. Existing comparisons between online self-representation and religious dress among Muslim and Jewish women includes work by Reina Lewis (2013) and Emma Tarlo (2013 and 2016). My research builds on and expands their contributions, while depending on slightly different primary sources and theoretical frameworks. Consequently, I use Mol's (2002) concept of 'enactment' to elaborate how Mahmood's (2005) and Avishai's (2008) arguments for women's religious practices within the confines of conservative religions to be understood as a form of ethical agency, might operate online.

Additionally, in light of how different forms of authority are enacted in the primary sources, I interrogate Heidi Campbell's (2007) preliminary framework of multiple layers of religious authority online. Approaching the loose blogging networks of about 30 blogs per religion from a qualitative, humanities perspective, I consider the bloggers to have creative control over their writing: I study online writing about religious dress, not religious dress itself. Beyond using snapshots of blog posts written by individual bloggers, I consider how some of the bloggers' perspectives have changed over time, and analyse interactions between bloggers and commenters in the 'Comments' sections of relevant posts. I argue that enactments of gendered religious identities online are often led by women, within frameworks that are simultaneously personal and which the bloggers themselves consider orthodox. Such personal, but not necessarily feminist, online accounts challenge mainstream narratives about religious dress as oppressive and externally mandated, and instead calls for an understanding of modest dress practices as mutable aspects of lived, and gendered, religious identities.

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# 0 Introduction

## 0.1 Religious dress and the rhetoric of oppression

The use of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the Republican presidential primaries<sup>1</sup> (including the removal of blogger Rose Hamid from a Trump rally)<sup>2</sup> in the United States and the re-opening of a case during the last Canadian general election,<sup>3</sup> regarding wearing of *niqabs*, or face veils, during citizenship ceremonies indicate that, while not always successful enough to turn an election, such rhetoric remains a powerful populist force. It is also, often, rooted in what some Muslim women wear. American and Canadian politicians' and commentators' continued use of the sceptre of the veiled Muslim woman as a counter-point to secular values, echo statements by European leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel, former Prime Minister David Cameron, former French President Nicholas Sarkozy and former Dutch Deputy Prime Minister Maxime Verhagen in early 2011<sup>4</sup> that 'multiculturalism has failed'. While national bans on face veiling currently only exist in Belgium and France, local bans and attempts at local bans are much more common<sup>5</sup> and there is wide public opposition to face veiling in many parts of North America.<sup>6</sup> While there are some

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<sup>1</sup>Diamond, Jeremy (2016). 'Silently Protesting Muslim Woman Ejected from Trump Rally'. *CNN*. 11 January. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/08/politics/donald-trump-muslim-woman-protesting-ejected/>. Retrieved August 1, 2016. Hamid was ostensibly rejected from the rally for causing a disturbance, following a silent protest where she stood up, in her *hijab*, when the Presidential candidate was making a speech arguing that refugees fleeing Syria were associated with ISIS. Donald Trump's campaign for Presidency has repeatedly included calls for Muslims to be banned from immigrating to the United States, Johnson, Jenna (2016). 'No, Donald Trump has not Softened his Stance on Banning Muslims'. *The Washington Post*. 12 May. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/no-donald-trump-has-not-softened-his-stance-on-banning-muslims/2016/05/12/6ec8d514-185c-11e6-aa55-670cabef46e0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/no-donald-trump-has-not-softened-his-stance-on-banning-muslims/2016/05/12/6ec8d514-185c-11e6-aa55-670cabef46e0_story.html). Retrieved August 1, 2016. The candidate has also suggested that the *hijab*-wearing Ghazala Khan, the mother of an American Muslim soldier who died in the Iraq war, had been banned by her husband from speaking at the Democratic National Convention: Walker, Tim (2016). 'Donald Trump Suggests Mother of Fallen Muslim-American Soldier "Wasn't Allowed" to Speak at DNC 2016'. *The Independent*. 30 July. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/donald-trump-khizr-ghazala-khan-mother-muslim-american-soldier-democratic-convention-a7164306.html>. Retrieved August 1, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hamid, Rose (2016). 'Salam! I come in Peace.' *Mrs. Rose Hamid* (blog). 29 January, 2016. <http://www.mrsrosehamid.com/hello-world/>. Retrieved August 1, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Barber, John (2015). 'Veil Debate Becomes Big Issue in Canada Election, Putting Conservatives in Lead'. *The Guardian*. 1 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/zunera-ishaq-veil-canada-election-conservatives>. Retrieved July 30, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Irving, Hélène (2011). 'Has Multiculturalism Failed in Europe?'. *Open Society Foundation*. 17 February. <http://blog.soros.org/2011/02/has-multiculturalism-failed-in-europe/>. Retrieved August 4, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Kozłowska, Anna (2015). 'The Place in the World that Have a Burqa Ban.' *Quartz*. 14 January. <http://qz.com/326086/the-places-in-the-world-that-have-a-burqa-ban/>. Retrieved June 7, 2016. See also Kılıç (2008) for a discussion of local bans of the *niqab* in Europe.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-niqab-neil-macdonald-1.3246179> Retrieved August 1, 2016.

indications that attitudes are changing,<sup>7</sup> mainstream media representations of women who wear religious clothing as ‘oppressed’ by their male co-religionists gives governments and other citizens’ leeway to engage in debates about religious dress, as this narrative means dress ceases to be regarded as a personal choice and becomes conceived of as a wider socio-political issue. This phenomenon, especially when related to Muslim women, has been addressed in detail by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum (2012), Jean Wallach Scott (2009) and Hilal Elver (2012), all of whom note an element of Islamophobia in what has come to be termed ‘headscarf controversies’. While the same academic and mainstream cultural and political attention has not been paid to Orthodox Jewish women’s dress (with exceptions such as Longman, 2002 and 2007, and Kaufman, 1991), representations of Orthodox Jewish women in US fiction and creative non-fiction indicate a similar preoccupation with the link between women’s religious dress and male, religiously informed, oppression. Such debates have occasionally made usually left-leaning secular feminists align themselves with culturally conservative social commentators and politicians and can be seen to influence women’s blogging about religious dress.

By discussing how the Muslim and Jewish bloggers whose writing I study have created women-run online spaces where they negotiate and discuss religious clothing and its roles in their lives, my thesis shows women being active participants in debates about modesty, fashion and religious practice. In an article published in the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance’s (JOFA) newsletter, Beth Samuels describes her reasons behind wearing religious dress. These reasons demonstrate that the religious considerations for women wearing religious dress should be taken seriously:

Just as tzitzit (similar to the kohen’s head ornament, tzitz) can be viewed as priestly garments worn by men, a head covering can be regarded as a priestly garment worn by women. When I was in elementary school, I wanted to wear a kippah and tzitzit like the boys in my class. I wanted to display my Jewish pride publicly, and I desired the opportunity to constantly “wear” a mitzvah. In some sense my hat grants me that privilege now. Both tzitzit and hats serve as constant reminders that every Jewish man and woman are part of the priestly nation, with obligations to fulfil God’s commandments.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As indicated by, for instance, the use of models wearing the *hijab* in high street fashion adverts for retail giant H&M: Sarkar, Monica (2015). ‘H&M’s Latest Look: Hijab-Wearing Muslim Model Stirs Debate. *CNN*. 29 September. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/29/europe/hm-hijab-model/>. Retrieved October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Samuels, Beth z”l. ‘Covering My Hair’ *JOFA Journal*, Fall 2009, 10. *Tzitzit* are tassels worn at the four corners of a prayer shawl, *tallit*, or undershirt, *tallit katan*, according to Num. 15:38-39. A *kippah*, or skull cap, is worn by (Orthodox) Jewish men, and as a sign of respect by men of all Jewish denominations inside a synagogue.

Similarly, *Wood Turtle*, self-proclaimed *hijabi* and blogger, gives the *hijab* a central place in her self-definition as part of an amusing but thoughtful post on why wearing religious clothing as a Halloween costume is inappropriate:

And while yes, I can take it off whenever I choose, the hijab for me IS my identity. It IS how I present myself to the world and it IS a reflection of my belief that I am following a religious tradition.<sup>9</sup>

In the same post, she brings attention to the bewildering question of how religious clothing is simultaneously imbued with spiritual significance while being something very ordinary:

The hijab as a concept and as a religious symbol of one's faith is sacred to many. Many still use their hijab to wipe their child's face clean, or advertise Calvin Klein and Coach designer hijabs and abayas. Does this lessen the hijab's sacredness? At what point does the hijab become a versatile cloth for costumes, house decorations or runway material?<sup>10</sup>

Given the wealth of such first person narratives about the religious use of dress, the argument for taking the religious dimension of religious dress seriously might seem an obvious one, perhaps. Nevertheless, critical readings of the report by the 2003 Stasi Commission (into the application of secularism in France), have shown that the possibility that young women might cover their hair because they consider it a religious duty was not considered (Asad, 2006, discussed in Tarlo and Moors, 2013:5), and the ongoing debates about religious dress in North America as well as in Europe show that religious dress remains a stigmatised part of women's religious and cultural practices. Women's religious clothing attracts more attention in the West than men's does – even when, as is the case with *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish people, the difference between the clothing worn by *haredi* men and secular men is greater than between *haredi* women and their secular counterparts. Consequently, an early consideration in this project was demonstrating that religious considerations (among others, such as political, cultural and aesthetic considerations) are an important aspect of how the bloggers whose writing I study represent religious dress. My analysis of their writing shows both the Muslim and Jewish bloggers to be actively engaged with the multifaceted tensions surrounding their religious practices – without necessarily self-defining as feminist.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2011/11/03/hijab-halloween/#more-3258>. Retrieved 4 November, 2011. All emphases in the original.

<sup>10</sup> <http://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2011/11/03/hijab-halloween/#more-3258>. Retrieved 4 November, 2011. All emphases in the original.

## 0.2 Research questions and hypotheses

My research therefore centres on Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women's blogging about religious dress. It seeks to answer three main questions:

- 1) Using modest dress as the focal point, how do Muslim and Jewish women in a North American cultural context use blogs to navigate their personal and religious self-identities?
- 2) What does this self-representation show about how female gender roles and minority religious practices are enacted in a secular or Christian setting?
- 3) What do these findings suggest about the intersection between conservative religious practices and the internet?

As I will discuss in my methodology section, these questions are the distillation of exploratory research done from primary and secondary sources about women's religious dress.

My first hypothesis is, therefore, that blogging about religious dress is a women-led form of online self-representation, a way in which lived religious practices are enacted (Mol, 2002). Drawing on Annemarie Mol's argument that reality is enacted through materials, I argue that enacting religious femininity can be done both through the religious dress these women wear and the blogs they use to write about their modest dress practices and concerns. Admittedly, some of the blogs I include have a more visual slant. However, the main focus of this project is on writing, especially that which is aimed at an online, interactive audience. Accordingly, the written word as an exploration of identity is the main focus of this project: the primary sources I use for this research consist of writers embodying their religiously dressed bodies in text.

My second hypothesis is that the comparison between Jewish and Muslim women writing in largely secular or Christian offline contexts suggests that writing about religious dress is part of how women 'do' religion. The interaction between external (non-religious) pressures, formal, male-dominated religious structures and women themselves regarding women's religious dress is not new. The internet affords a space where women can choose how they represent their religious practices and piety – and ultimately, themselves. Blogs, a medium with few gatekeepers and a genre that encourages personal disclosure, allow us to see how bloggers negotiate different concerns about religion, modesty and gender roles as a part of finding commonality with other bloggers in an

online diaspora. Dress is not only part of religious practice, but is highly gendered; informed by male structures but shown, on the blogs, to be also done in negotiation with other women.

Women's blogging about modest dress shows that such practices are not static. Practitioners frequently claim that their religious clothing is worn in accordance with tradition that stems back to a mythological past, be it rooted in the Torah, the Quran, or derived from later, though still ancient, sources such as the Babylonian Talmud or the *Hadith* literature. For instance, *Chava*, writing on an Orthodox Jewish website, argues that:

Traditional Jewish clothing has remained essentially the same after all of these millennia. It is said that before the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt when they were slaves, there were only three ways in which they were different from their slaveholders. Those three things were their names, the fact that they spoke Hebrew, and the clothing that they wore. This ancient Jewish clothing was a major factor in what set the Hebrews apart from the Egyptians.<sup>11</sup>

However, while part of the imaginative power that religious dress holds is related to its perceived link to both divine and historical precedent, religious dress practices within both Judaism and Islam have changed significantly over historical time. In the spirit of such fluctuations, it is unsurprising that individual women's religious dress practices are not inevitably on linear trajectories toward greater or lesser levels of physical observance of modesty rules. Both the Jewish and Muslim blogs show women blogging about changing levels of observance in their religious dress over time. How to dress or whether (or in what way) to cover their hair, at an intersection between secular fashion and religious clothing guidelines, is an ongoing concern on the blogs, and some remove hair coverings. The commonalities, rather than the differences, of these concerns and desires are perhaps best illustrated by the existence of shopping sites like *Modest Clothes*,<sup>12</sup> where the category of 'Western modest clothing' is juxtaposed with specifically 'Islamic', 'Jewish', 'Latter Day Saints/Mormon', 'Plain Simple Christian', 'Catholic' and 'Trendy Modest Christian' categories, as well as several 'ethnic' clothes and 'speciality' clothes. As this intersection between consumerism, religion and the internet is evident online, these blogs show that, in contrast to the arguments that religiously dressed women are somehow trapped in a (pre-feminist) past, their ways of discussing what they

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<sup>11</sup>Chava (?). 'Ancient Jewish Religious Clothing Customs'. *Orthodox-Jews.com*. <http://www.orthodox-jews.com/jewish-religious-clothing.html#axzz1YK118ZpE>. Last accessed 28 September, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.modestclothes.com/>. Retrieved July 21, 2017.

wear, how to find such clothing and how it fits in the rest of their lives, are not only done in a highly contemporary medium, but are also ever-evolving.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the sum of these hypotheses point to a cross-religious similarity between the writing about religious dress by women from different religious tradition, suggesting similarities both of experiences as members of offline minority groups, but also of how the internet is influencing “even” conservative religion. As I will discuss in Chapter One, secularisation theorists have argued that the personalisation of religion would lead to a decline in religiosity and a movement toward personalised or new religions. Conversely, my research suggests that the personalised, informal structures of authority – that are part of how the internet is transforming personal relationships – can be accommodated for within the frameworks of traditional interpretations of religions. Instead of marking a decline in observance, such authority is instead linked to how a writer expresses herself in an online community, informed by and taking into account – but not bounded by – both offline (male) religious authority, religious texts, secular fashions and both secular and religious ideals of womanhood. However, as shown by the lively debates in their own blogging networks, portraying these writers as oppressed is at best an over-simplification and at worst a wilful misrepresentation.

### **0.3 Outline of thesis**

In Chapter One, I offer a literature review of the texts from a range of disciplines that were consulted in this research. Sitting at the intersection of many disciplines, including religious studies, dress studies, and religion online, the results from my analysis of the primary sources add nuance to contemporary academic debates about secularisation and secularism, agency and feminism as well as the emerging field of religion online. In Chapter Two, I offer a discussion and analysis of the methodological and ethical concerns that influenced this research, especially important concerns given the relative novelty of doing primary academic research exclusively online. Here, I also provide an overview of the primary sources on which this research is based, with the intent of giving indications of wider trends in the more than sixty blogs included in this project, which in

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<sup>13</sup> Modest clothing is also increasingly produced by both fashion houses and high street fashion, suggesting the power of market forces on making stylish modest clothing more available to consumers. Some of these are explicitly targeted at Muslim buyers, a market estimated to be £100m in the UK alone, but not all of them: Uniqlo Web News (2015) ‘UNIQLO Collaborates with Hana Tajima to Launch Modest Wear Collection’. 4 June. [http://www.uniqlo.com/sg/corp/pressreleasniw e/2015/06/uniqlo\\_collaborates\\_with\\_hana\\_1.html](http://www.uniqlo.com/sg/corp/pressreleasniw e/2015/06/uniqlo_collaborates_with_hana_1.html). Retrieved 8 March, 2016. Al Zubaydi, Eman (2016). ‘Islamic Collections Seen at London’s Fashion Week’. *St John Street News*. 22 February. <http://stjohnstreet.co.uk/islamic-collections-seen-at-londons-fashion-week/>. Retrieved 8 March, 2016. Brown, Natalie (2015). ‘The Great Fashion Cover-up! World-leading Islamic Clothing Firm Opens First Boutique Store in London... Selling Arabic Cloaks, Luxury Hijabs and Flowing Gowns’. *The Daily Mail*. 30 March. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3006442/World-leading-modest-clothing-firm-opens-boutique-store-London.html>. Retrieved 8 March, 2016. Petrilla, Molly. ‘The Next Big Untapped Fashion Market: Muslim Women’. *Fortune*. 15 July. <http://fortune.com/2015/07/15/muslim-women-fashion/>. Retrieved 8 March, 2016.

turn positions the following chapters in a broader blogging network. Chapter Three, 'Blogging the body religious – counter-narratives, variety and enactment through writing about religious dress', is an analysis of how both Muslim and Jewish women's blogging about religious dress can not only be seen as counter-narratives to prevalent mainstream conceptions about dress and gender roles in conservative religious communities, but that the primary sources can be fruitfully interpreted through the lens of Annemarie Mol's concept of enactment. Additionally, I argue that such blogging shows that a wide range of concerns inform religious practices. Many of these considerations are religious, but others are aesthetic, or driven by a desire to be visibly associated with a minority religious identity. While demonstrating knowledge of feminist secular concerns about agency in religious dress is a common narrative device on these blogs, such knowledge does not necessarily result in rejection of modest dress practices. Instead, I argue, agency is an insufficient interpretive framework for understanding the combination of conforming and creativity enacted through, blogging about religious dress. Next, in Chapter Four, 'Negotiating religion authority online; gendered practices and gendered spaces', I apply Heidi Campbell's 2007 schema of the four layers of religious authority online to my primary sources. In evaluating Campbell's work against my results, I argue that, while her schema is (as intended) a useful preliminary interrogation into the very important question of how religious authority operates online, future discussions of online authority benefit from my results. My results suggest that there is an emphasis on personal experiences as sources of authority about gendered matters such as religious dress online, as well as calling for increased sensitivity to forms of authority that are derived from the underlying logic of the media rather than offline religious structures. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of my results and suggested avenues for future research.

# 1. Literature review

## 1.1 An interdisciplinary approach

As this thesis stems from an unapologetically interdisciplinary approach to its subject matter, the literature review encompasses work from several interlinking disciplines. These include dress studies, religious studies and sociology of religion as well as works of social anthropology and philosophy. Importantly, it also includes academic texts about the online space. Some of these position themselves as being social science (Ackland, 2013), others from digital humanities (Rettberg, 2014), literature and media studies (Sørensen, 2009), as well as the emerging field of digital religion (Campbell, 2012). This approach self-consciously mimics the mash-up cultures of the internet itself, while pointing to the need to actively embrace multidisciplinary approaches to studying online phenomena.

## 1.2 Secularism and secularisation theories

While I do not explicitly study their offline contexts, the Jewish and Muslim bloggers whose writing I study predominantly live within nominally secular, North American multicultural societies. Self-defining as differently religious to the rest of (secular or Christian) society is significant part of how these bloggers enact their online identities by blogging about religious dress, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. Mainstream society is often depicted as misunderstanding or misrepresenting the lived religious experiences which the bloggers write about. As I discuss in my survey of the primary sources in Chapter Two, being ‘religious’ is a cornerstone of these bloggers’ online identities. The names of their blogs or – for those who use a pseudonym – the names they use online, often allude to their gender, religious affiliation or even the religious dress that forms part of their religious practice.

Despite their everyday usage, neither ‘secular’ nor ‘religious’ are uncontested or easily defined terms. Indeed, providing a stable and cross-culturally applicable definition of ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ is a challenge. Consequently, it has occasionally led to light-hearted attempts to define both terms, such as this one by Edward Bailey, the founder of the journal *Implicit Religions*: ‘Secular is really quite easy to define! Its meaning keeps changing yet remains consistent. It always means, simply, the opposite of “religious” – whatever that means’ (quoted in Swatos, 1999:213). One of my original contributions to research is expanding early investigations of cross-religious



interpretations of women's blogging about religious dress (such as Tarlo in Lewis, 2013). Given the time and length limitations on a PhD thesis, combining extensive discussion of the boundaries of 'religion' as an analytical concept with extensive primary research is outside the scope of this project. Instead, for the purpose of this thesis, I use Talal Asad's argument from *Genealogies of Religion* (Asad, 2009) about the limited usefulness of searching for a universal definition of religion. Instead of, for instance, searching for a universal definition of secular or religious, Asad encourages considering religion in terms of practice, language and sensibility, which consequently informs my approach to the primary sources. Moving away from the idea that there is necessarily a core belief system at the heart of 'religion' allows me to concentrate on analysing behaviours and actions. It also allows me to emphasise how religion is enacted in everyday life, rather than overly focusing on, for example, the historical development of religious structures and textual interpretation by religious (male) elites.

Nevertheless, a brief survey of the literature about the relationship between religion and the secular in Western societies is necessary, since the results of my research point to the limitations of secularisation theories that indicate a weakening of religion in contemporary society. Secularism denotes the formal separation of political and religious institutions in the governing of a country. Both Canada and the United States do not have a formal state religion, and are thus — ostensibly — secular. Secularisation, however, is a progress narrative proposing the decreasing importance of religion in society over time, where the expressions of secularism vary depending on the dominant religious beliefs in the country (a definition I derive from Asad, 2003). As I discuss below, much early research in the comparative study of religion was founded on Max Weber's work, as it constructed a framework for studying diverse meanings of what religion might be, as well the effects and history of religion. Consequently, Weber's concept of 'disenchantment', as a way of explaining the mental processes which differ between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, echoed through much twentieth century discussion about secularisation (Weber, 2009:155).

Subsequently, early secularisation theorists developed the Weberian themes of differentiation and disenchantment, with David Martin (1978) arguing for a gradual decline of religion in modern societies, and Peter Berger stating that 'Christianity has been its own gravedigger' (Berger 1967:129). In the last few decades, secularisation theories have offered more nuanced interpretations of the complex processes involved in the evolution of religion and society. For instance, Casanova argues that secularisation is a multifaceted process which sees societal institutions separated from religious norms, religious beliefs and practices declining, and religion

being shifted from the public sphere to the private sphere, but that not all of these have to be happening at once (discussed in Karpov, 2010:8). Such a division was initially useful for this project, as it provided a framework for considering religious practices as something that could exist in many different spheres of society, and which did not have to be directly linked to formal religious structures.

Despite the increasing sophistication of secularisation theories, recent accounts nevertheless retain traces of the argument that modernity and differentiation diminish the role that religion plays in society, compared to a past position of strength (Bruce, 2006 and Berger, 1999). Ammerman identifies this as a 'narrative of loss' (2010:155), where religion has moved from a position of strength to one of relative weakness. She argues that such a narrative is both derived from specifically European contexts (which sees the power of European State churches in decline), as well as from a possibly flawed supposition that society was once more homogenous than it is today. Both considerations limit the usefulness of such 'narratives of loss' as explorations of current trends in religious practices. In making this argument, Ammerman is critical of Peter Berger's early analysis that pluralism and globalisation changes how the individual experiences faith. Berger considers that we have replaced the 'taken for grantedness' of religion that he considers characteristic of earlier Western societies with an individual's search. Such a search, he suggests, can be allied with a dramatic weakening of religious traditionalism in society, despite the resurgence in religious practices in the West that he has since identified, discussed below. I agree with Woodhead (2007) that to assume, with Berger, that religion covers secular societies like a sort of 'sacred canopy' is to ignore how religions reinforce or challenge aspects of society such as gender roles and other power structures. Therefore, I argue that the differentiation of religious practices enacted online, and the personal or individual search associated with such enactments, need not be understood as a weakening of religion, contrasted with a past (and possible illusory) position of religious strength.

Furthermore, religion has not become irrelevant. This appears to be even more firmly the case in North America than in Europe, where 'leaving its assigned place in the private space, ha[s] thrust itself into the public arena of political and moral contestation' (Casanova, 2011:3). (Canada, according to Berger (2008:10), falls somewhere between the USA and Europe in terms of religiosity.) Admittedly, the percentage of American adults who are religiously unaffiliated has

grown from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2014.<sup>14</sup> However, even beyond the frequent invocations of and allusions to Christianity in many parts of public and political life in North America (including both the United States and Canada), the United States has a higher proportion of religiously affiliated adults than most other industrialised nations. Christian denominations remain the most populous religious groups.<sup>15</sup> In the fifteen years since the attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the emergence of the Christian Right, both opposed to Islam internationally and infusing politics with ostensibly Christian concerns domestically, has continued to be a vocal force in US politics (see for example Corpis, 2007:6). Samuel Huntingdon's *Clash of Civilizations*-thesis which, among other sources of conflict, position Western cultures in opposition to the 'Muslim World', while itself not a neoconservative position, was used as a justification for the invasion of Iraq under US President George W. Bush (Bassiri, 2010:369). Rightfully criticised for its at times simplistic and inaccurate portrayal of the Middle East and Islam as a threatening monolith culturally opposed to the West (for example by Said, 2008), Huntingdon's thesis has nevertheless been used as a legitimisation of targeting the cultural sphere for international and domestic political discussions (Bassiri, 2010:369).

Hence, such political and cultural developments, in tension with the need to accommodate for different cultures and practices within the wider panoply of 'multiculturalism', have resulted in academic debates about the future of secularism. Such debates include whether or not secularism needs to be redefined, if Western societies are desecularising or if Western societies should be considered to be post-secular. Such concerns are relevant for women who wear modest dress as an aspect of their religious practice, as it can influence legal debates and policies surrounding the use of religious symbols in the public sphere. In light of the manifold resurgences of religious practices worldwide, Berger introduces the concept of desecularisation (Berger, 1999) as an amendment of his earlier secularisation theories. He regards desecularisation as a reaction to secularising forces, founded on mass displeasure with secular elites, which in turn implies a link between religiosity and lower levels of education. While my research is admittedly based on a relatively small sample size, and the education levels of the bloggers are not always made explicit, no such link has become apparent. That religious resurgence is not necessarily associated with low levels of education echoes

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<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life (2015). 'US Public Becoming Less Religious'. November. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>. Retrieved 10 June, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> As the United States Census does not ask about religious affiliation, statistics about religious affiliation have to be drawn from other sources, such as the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life's 'Religious Landscape Study'. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>. Retrieved 10 June, 2016.

findings from by Mahmood's ethnography of women's participation in the Islamic Revival in Egypt (2005), which I discuss at length below.

Additionally, my research indicates the limitations of describing religious practices in a secular society as a matter of 'choice', without suggesting that religious practice is the result of social pressures. According to Karpov, both secularisation and desecularisation tell 'mutually complementary stories of the complex relationships between religion and society' (Karpov, 2010:6), in which counter-secular movements, in search of transcendental meaning, emerge as reactions to secular society. For Karpov, desecularisation can include both newly emergent religious movements and/or revitalisation of conservative religious groups (Karpov, 2010:38). While I agree with Karpov about the vitality of such religious practices, however, I argue that the division he posits between old and new religion is unnecessary. What my work instead suggests is that the enactment of personalised embodied religious practice and adherence to orthodox interpretations of religions that depend on such practice, might appear to be in tension, but can be experienced and enacted as mutually reinforcing. The bloggers whose writing I study often self-define as being conservatively religious. Within that framework, however, some of the ways in which they practice appear to have more in common with online New Religious Movements than traditional offline religious structures. Such commonalities indicate the importance of considering the importance of discussing the online public sphere when analysing contemporary religious practices.

How we should interact in and govern a multicultural public sphere in the twenty-first century remains a challenging conundrum for individuals, politicians and academics alike. In an influential essay, Habermas argues that the public sphere could now be said to be post-secular (Habermas, 2008), courtesy of the resurgence of political Islam and the ongoing importance of religion in Western societies. Habermas argues that a post-secular public sphere would require ongoing negotiations between different religious groups and the secular, allowing the religious to have more room in the public sphere, while at the same time striving to remain civil while negotiating social relations (2008:21). More recent scholarship by Furani (2014) suggests, in contrast to Habermas's suggestion that this is a new phenomenon, it is better to understand such ongoing negotiations as indicative of the flexible boundaries of secularism. Calling for a secular society that recognises and includes different perspectives, through increased tolerance for difference, Charles Taylor argues that there is 'no reason written into the essence of things why a similar evolution [to the liberalisation of Christianity] cannot take place in Muslim communities' (Taylor, 2011:36).

Saba Mahmood's critique of Taylor's 2009 tome *A Secular Age* (Mahmood, 2010), while published before Taylor's 2011 essay, anticipates some of the problems with Taylor's perspective on how multi-religious and multicultural societies can be governed under the panoply of 'secularism'. Noting that though Taylor's tone of asking for Christian tolerance and understanding has attractive elements, Mahmood argues that it is incomplete without a discussion of how secularism is influenced by underlying Christian power structures. Taylor's genealogy of the secular is underpinned by the concept of Western society as a progress narrative, and fails to accommodate for the possibility that an 'evolution' of (in the case of his argument) Islam might be different to liberal interpretations of Christian denominations. While I do not lay claim to resolving these debates, I agree with Ammerman that we ought to 'examine how multiple religions, ideas and practices constitute the dynamic social reality at any given place or time' (2010:155). Consequently, I point to the need for taking a variety of women's perspectives on the role of religion dress practices in the public sphere seriously on their own terms, rather than continuing to depend on religious leaders and self-appointed spokespeople – especially when such perspectives are readily available in the online public sphere. A recurring theme in my research is that the secular is a constant presence in these women's writing – one which is rarely as sensitive and knowledgeable about their concerns as they are about those that surface from the mainstream.

### **1.3 Religion online**

Given the centrality of the internet to my research, one of the more challenging aspects of (post/de)secularisation theories is that they often give limited attention to role of the internet as a vector of religious practice and of wider social change in Western societies. Instead, the rapidly growing, inter-disciplinary field of religion online, which focuses on how religion and internet mediated technologies interact and inform each other, proved a useful entry-point for analysing how women's blogging about religious dress is an enactment of online religious identities. Early research in this area drew a distinction between *religion online* and *online religion*, where the former describes the online presence of mosques, churches and synagogues online, originally largely replicating offline structures but in an online space (see for instance Helland, in Hadden and Cowan 2001:7). Religion online included commercial sites that sold religious books and other religious paraphernalia. Conversely, many of the early studies of online religion were based on primary research about New Religious Movements (see Campbell 2007:1048). A challenging, early implication of studies of online religion was that the internet would not necessarily usher in secularisation, but would either reinforce religious practice or remove religious hierarchies in those religions that remained vibrant. At the very least, such approaches have the benefit over secularisation theories in that they consider

the importance of the internet to religions, as the internet is seen, at the very least, as a force for ‘change’ (Helland 2001:34) – both online and off. For Helland, taking such online religious practice seriously on its own terms, means considering online religion as religion by and for individuals, rather than institutions, enacted in an online space. He draws on research about both religions such as Catholicism, as well as New Religious Movements including neo-pagans and Wiccans (2001:28), virtual churches such as Alpha Church and what he terms ‘web-oriented religious organizations’ such as Digitalism or Technosophy (2001:32).<sup>16</sup> According to Helland, for those who live their religion on the internet, there is no division between their offline and online beliefs (Helland 2005:12). Non-hierarchical, personalised networked religious structures are therefore the religious uses of the internet that Helland believes to have the greatest potential longevity.

However, while what I study is primarily a networked environment, the benefit of hindsight in the rapidly evolving online environment shows the limitations of Helland’s suggestion that online religious networks would trump hierarchy – at least for now. Helland’s suggestion that such a shift of power was imminent derives in part from the underlying logic of the internet, which is itself a networked rather than hierarchical structure. As a result, he notes that; ‘Hierarchies and networks are two very different systems and the Internet was really developed for only one of them’ (Helland 2005:13). However, early concerns (or hopes) that widespread adoption of the internet would have negative implications for religious adherence among Christian denominations in North America have been shown to be exaggerated by Campbell’s work about the Online Church (Campbell, 2005), which demonstrated that the argument that internet communities of interest could re-invigorate offline groups (Katz, 2002) could equally be applied to religious communities. Notably, internet-mediated communities change and alter the boundaries of religious institutions, allowing them to connect across geographic distances, and allowing for a different sources of authority to emerge (Hutchings, 2015:3287). Studying contemporary blogs allows us to identify a variety of forms of authority, all under the wider category of being ‘religious’. However, I remain careful of not positing a false binary between vernacular or lived religion and formal religious structures while analysing the different forms of religious authority at work on the blogs in Chapter Four, choosing instead to consider all as (often mutually reinforcing) aspects of enacted religious practice.

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<sup>16</sup> Searching for these three examples in July 2016 shows Alpha Church (<http://www.alphachurch.org/>) to still be active online, while [www.digitalism.org](http://www.digitalism.org) appears not to have been updated recently, and the domain for [www.technosophy.com](http://www.technosophy.com) was for sale. Such a result is far from unusual, as I have seen in the flourishing and demise of different blogs during the course of my research. Longitudinal studies that investigate the life cycles of largely online religious movements compared to those that contain a traditional offline hierarchy are an interesting avenue for future research. Retrieved 17 July, 2016.

Beyond investigating how religion online might affect religious hierarchies, an ongoing question in studies of religion online are whether or how the internet would lead to secularisation. Mediatisation theory, namely that the publishing structures of the internet would lead to further secularisation of society through undermining the positions of traditional religious authorities to mediate beliefs and practises, was originally proposed by Hjarvard (2008). However, the overly deterministic elements of mediatisation theory have been rightly criticised by Lövheim (2011), who also argues that Hjarvard maintains too close a focus on making sense of the world through elite religious structures in his analysis of how mediatisation will influence religion. Lövheim argues that a close relationship between elite religious structures and sense-making has long been a minority position in the West, an argument which perhaps draws too heavily on the Scandinavian sources she studies. More interestingly for my project, Lövheim suggests that believers in Scandinavia compensate for lowered church attendance by engaging with other Christians online. Such a shift online is particularly useful for my research, as it sets a precedent for my results that show many of the bloggers drawing on their online religious communities for support they might lack in their offline religious communities. Furthermore, Lövheim notes that the porous boundaries between formal religious structures and lived or personal religion (Ammerman, 2006) makes Hjarvard's concept of 'banal', unstable personal religion, one that has limited use for current academic investigation. Lövheim's rejection of a binary between formal and personal religious practices which, as Ammerman (2010) argues, is founded on a flawed assumption of a homogenous past, and where such boundaries are further eroded by the facilitated dissemination of information online, offers a precedent for my argument that the bloggers whose writing I study enact online identities that are both personal and within religious structures.

Accordingly, religion need not be weakened by the proliferation of media forms. Birgit Meyer considers even an implied differentiation between 'religion and the media' as a problematic one for the study of religion. She argues that such a differentiation contains 'a hidden "media theory" according to which media are held to be secondary to immediate encounters with the transcendent' (Meyer 2013:14). By contrast with (what I agree is an unnecessary) demotion of media and writing in enacting religious identities, Meyer argues for the use of 'mediation' as a theoretical starting point. 'Mediation', for Meyer, permits an understanding of how media can occupy a 'formative' role as a 'constitutive part of religion' (2013:13). Referencing Van de Port (2011), Meyers states that mediation adheres to a 'postmodern logic' where 'reality is not supposed to lie beyond representation, but to be constituted by it' (2013:6). A benefit of mediation theory for

my research is that it combines the turn to 'lived religion' within religious studies and concomitant personal searches for religious experience, with an understanding of the important influence that online media bring to such developments.

Similar to Annemarie Mol's concept of 'enactment', an analytical framework for understanding how seemingly disparate interpretations of materials and events are combined to constitute a lived reality (Mol, 2002), Meyer cautions that the turn to studying the body in religious studies should not result in 'dismissing language and other semiotic forms as secondary to that'. Instead, Meyer argues that the body should be understood within the framework of mediation, stating that 'the body itself is formed through mediation: a medium that indexes its immediacy through personal and yet socially shaped experiences' (2013:10). Given the constitutive role of mediation in shaping reality for Meyer, she reacts strongly against the teleological secularising underpinnings inherent in mediatisation theories, remaining 'suspicious' of invoking the media as 'primary movers' in society. While I give more credence to the influence of media genres and technologies in shaping mediated realities than does Meyer, I agree with Hutchings (2015:3287) that mediatisation is a useful intellectual counterbalance to, for instance, Campbell's (2007) emphasis on the ability of both churches and individuals to harness internet technology in services of their own purposes. Combining these analytical threads about religion in a nominally secular, internet-mediated and –mediatised age, I challenge Bryan S. Turner's argument that consumerism and diminishing of religious institutional authority combine in personalised, post-secular religious movements (especially online) to create weaker, choice-based religious identities than those which characterised the past (Turner in Gorski, 2012:153). Instead, as I will discuss at greater length later in this chapter, I draw on Annemarie Mol's work (2002) to show how the blogs show competing and seemingly incoherent ontologies about modest dress are enacted into religiously adherent self-identities online.

The circumstances in which such enactments take place are an aspect of Bhabha's concept of the 'Third Space' which informs my understanding of the importance of the internet as an online public sphere (1994). In the Third Space, culture and identity are not only questioned, and hybridised, but also renegotiated; a liminal space written into existence, unbound by hierarchies and dualistic constructions like secular/religious. While Bhabha's work does not explicitly address writing online, feminist scholars such as Grace Ji-Sun Kim (2015:157) consider the questioning of culture and identity within the Third Space as a possible area for renegotiating power and identity, and have speculated that the Third Space can therefore be located on the internet. That Bhabha's



notion of the Third Space might be a fruitful way of approaching the changing of religion in and through being mediated by the internet is beginning to be explored by scholars such as Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (2012), and consequently beginning to be considered as a foundation for digital religious studies (Murchison, 2015 and von Benecke, 2013). In Hoover and Echchaibi's elaboration of Bhabha's work, digital third spaces are not only hybrid and fluid, but ones where all variations of traditions (new, old, anti) meet. According to Campbell, this approach to 'the religious digital requires a recentering of our attention of the shape of religion in light of the digital' (2012:4). For Hoover and Echchaibi, negotiations in the third space could re-imagine religion, which von Benecke rightly suggests would have profound consequences for religious authority – though I suggest that such renegotiations do not inherently undermine all forms of religious authority.

#### **1.4 Being (in) a minority**

For traditional structures of religious authority, therefore, the internet can be understood both as a means of proselytising and disseminating religious information, as well as a challenge to religiously derived morals and forms of authority. My analysis of Judaism and Islam as minority religious groups in North American is informed by Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that 'minority' and 'majority' are value-laden constructions, rather than natural entities. For Chakrabarty, these concepts have developed beyond their popular meanings (drawn from demographic statistics), and are concepts related to European colonial paternalism:

For example, they often assumed that their histories contained the majority instances of norms that every other human society should aspire to; compared to them, others were still the "minors" for whom they, the "adults" of the world, had to take charge, and so on. (2000:100)

Evidence from the blogs, where many of the bloggers challenge what they perceive as mainstream 'rescue' narratives about religiously dressed women (on the basis of insufficient understanding of religion as it is lived, rather than its representation by media or even religious leaders), suggest that traces of such paternalism remain. Many of the bloggers are also multiple minorities – not only in terms of their religion, but also in terms of their racial, sub-cultural or sexual orientation. As Mary Douglas (2004) has shown, being in a minority can influence which religious practices are considered to be adherents to have everyday relevance in their lives. For instance, Douglas's discussion of the compliance to food taboos among poor Irish descendants in London, shows that

certain religious practices take on greater and different meaning in diasporic conditions than they might have in situations where the religious group form the majority population. The elevated importance of certain religious practices in diasporic conditions appears to be the case with the Muslim bloggers regarding dress itself, a perspective supported by Leila Ahmed's (2011) work on the meanings the *hijab* takes on in different contexts. It is less evident in the Jewish blogs, though being visibly part of their religious community is also a consideration for some of the Jewish bloggers.

Even though I agree with Ammerman (2014) about the limitations of statistics for providing an accurate picture of lived religion, a quick discussion of quantitative surveys of both Judaism and Islam in North America helps sketch some of the offline contexts alluded to on the blogs. In Canada, the 2011 census shows 1% of the population to be Jewish.<sup>17</sup> The percentage of Jewish people in the United States varies from between 1.8% to 2.2% of the adult population depending on whether or not Jews without religious affiliation are included in the definition, making them the second largest religious group in the United States. With a wider scope of what it might mean to be Jewish, that figure rises to up to 3.8% (about 9 million people),<sup>18</sup> figures that have remained relatively stable over the past fifty years. Admittedly, the proportion of American Jews who identify as non-religious has increased<sup>19</sup> over the past few decades, which would appear to be in line with secularisation theories about the decreasing importance of religion in light of people having more options regarding belonging to a religious community – or not.

Tempering the secularisation narrative, the growing influence and proportion of Orthodoxy in North American Judaism points to the complexities and variations between increased religious adherence and secularisation theories discussed above. Apparent and relative demographic stability should not be taken as an indication of North American Judaism being static, neither in practices nor in the composition of Jewish communities. The proportion and influence of the various Orthodox Jewish communities (which for Pew Research includes Modern Orthodox and Haredi, or Ultra-Orthodox, of which Hasidic Jews are a subset) appears to be growing.<sup>20</sup> About 10% of the total Jewish population in the United States currently self-define as Orthodox. This appears to

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<sup>17</sup> Statistics Canada (2011). 'Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada'. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm#a6>. Retrieved 15 June, 2016

<sup>18</sup> Lipka, Michael (2013). 'How Many Jews are there in the United States?'. *Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life*. 2 October <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/02/how-many-jews-are-there-in-the-united-states/> Retrieved 15 June 15, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> *Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life* (2013). 'A Portrait of Jewish Americans.' 1 October. <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/> Retrieved 15 June, 2016

<sup>20</sup> *Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life* (2015). 'A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews'. 26 August. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/08/26/a-portrait-of-american-orthodox-jews/>. Retrieved 15 June 15, 2016.

include Modern Orthodox Judaism, to which many of the Jewish bloggers included in this thesis belong. Modern Orthodoxy draws on teachings of mid-nineteenth century Germany reforming rabbis such as Samson Raphael Hirsch, and as the name suggests, combines a commitment to living according to the Torah with active participation in the rest of (secular) society (Efron, 2013:290). The resurgence of Orthodoxy in North American Jewish life is important in terms of the vitality of women's religious dress practice online, especially as some Orthodox religious leaders demonstrate discomfort with internet mediated technologies, while other communities actively embrace the internet for outreach and education.

Despite an emphasis on tradition and continuity as organising logics of their religious practices, North American Orthodox Jewish communities are far from static. While religion and religiously linked identity might be becoming less important for some North American Jewish people, it remains a powerful organising force for many others. Such change has been significant in the last half a century, with Heilman (2006) arguing that there is a difference between the nominally Orthodox of the middle of the last century, and the Orthodox of today, for whom he argues that 'Orthodox commitments are powerful and consuming' (2006:62). Heilman regards the shift toward an emphasis on Orthodoxy for a vocal and growing minority of Jewish people as a move to the 'right'. While this interpretation of the political and social developments among American Orthodox Jews might appear to be in line with the interpretation from the Pew Research Center of the growing influence of Orthodoxy, it has been modified by Krakowski (2012). Using both demographic data and interviews with people associated with three ultra-Orthodox boys' schools, Krakowski suggests that American Orthodoxy's purported slide to the 'right' may have had the unexpected result of making ultra-Orthodoxy less insular.

The tensions between insularity and outreach, and of tradition within modernity, is negotiated by the bloggers whose writing I study. Rubel (2009) argues that since the 1980s, the Orthodox Jewish world has held an increasing grasp on the secular imagination. Consequently, she attributes the increasing cultural space occupied by critical accounts of the Orthodox as being a reflection of the battle for Jewish American cultural identity. Many such critical accounts include mentions of Orthodox dress. In a relatively recent example, Deborah Feldman's best-selling memoir of leaving Williamsburg's Satmar Hasidic community (Feldman, 2012), shows her leaving her husband and community, and being excited about changing from the skirts she wore as a Hasidic woman to wearing jeans (2012:230). Altering her dress is part of removing herself from a community she sees as nothing but oppressive. As part of promoting her book, Feldman's

transformation was similarly demonstrated in mainstream media interviews by her love of secular fashion.<sup>21</sup> Rubel's work suggests that the audience for such works of fiction is driven by a desire for readers to reflect their own views about the Orthodox world as oppressive for people in general and women in particular. She is highly critical of this attitude, to the point where Sylvia Barack Fishman (2011) has suggested Rubel's critique to be heavy-handed. While I agree that Rubel's analysis sometimes lacks nuance, I suggest that the popularity of such a narrative stems from a similar combination of curiosity and xenophobia that underpins that of books such as Betty Mahmoody's bestselling memoir *Not Without my Daughter* (1987). Later filmed with Sally Fields in the title role, Mahmoody's novel tapped into a wider cultural, Orientalist imagination and helped associate religious dress with domestic abuse (as criticised by Mahmood, 2011). While I do not question the veracity of such testimonies, nor the existence of misogyny and abuse in insular and integrationist communities alike, I agree with Rubel and Mahmood that the repeated enthusiasm with which such narratives are met speaks in part to a fascination with the Other, as well as to a less benign affirmation of secular ways of life.

Concerns about the tensions between insularity and assimilation are not only, however, felt by the secular majority, but also by members of religious minorities. Such tensions are exacerbated by the greater ease of dissemination of information offered by the internet, in comparison to the complex gatekeeping which characterised print and broadcast media. Reina Lewis (2013) notes that some of her sources, who run a Jewish modest dress company online, do so under a general dispensation from their rabbis. The dispensation allows these women use of the internet when it is essential for business, but that using the internet for leisure is either very restricted or limited through the use of software (Lewis, 2013:54-55). Similarly, and theatrically, the Orthodox, men-only Anti-Internet Rally held at CitiField in Brooklyn in 2012,<sup>22</sup> reportedly encouraged the use of such restrictive software<sup>23</sup> to limit the potentially pernicious influence of the internet on Orthodox families. This view of the internet as a double-edged sword can be inferred on Chabad.org, the website run by the most external-facing of the Hasidic groups. Here, readers are not explicitly banned from using the internet at home, but are cautioned by Rabbi Moshe Goldman that he does not have the internet at home, as he cautions against using it for anything other than business and

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance: Dumas, Daisy (2012). 'Sexual Assault at 12, Married at 17, Divorced at 23: One Woman's Explosive Revelations of Life in an Ultra-Conservative Hasidic Household'. *The Daily Mail*. 8 February. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2097763/Deborah-Feldman-memoir-Revelations-life-ultra-conservative-Hasidic-household.html>. Retrieved June 23rd, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Millikan, Arika (2012). 'Orthodox Jews Rally to Keep the Internet Kosher'. *Wired*. 23 May. <http://www.wired.com/2012/05/orthodox-jews-anti-internet-rally/>. Retrieved 3 July 3, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance <http://venishmartem.com/> or <http://www.enativ.com/>. Retrieved 25 July 25, 2016.

‘using this incredible medium to disseminate Torah and Judaism.’<sup>24</sup> In the interest of incorporating a range of perspectives on religious dress and the internet, my sources, both among the Jewish and Muslim bloggers, are drawn from different communities of varying insularity and conservatism, although the nature of my research means that they all have internet access.

Also a minority religion in the West, Islam is the second most populous and fastest growing religion worldwide. There are significant demographic differences between Islam in North America and Europe. Despite the occasionally vitriolic political rhetoric about Islam, Muslims form a much smaller proportion of the North American population than the projected 10% of the European populations that are expected to be Muslim by the same date.<sup>25</sup> Currently, about 1% of the current US population is Muslim, with the proportion of Muslims in the United States projected to rise to over 2% by 2050, in part because currently, about 10% of immigrants to the United States are Muslim. A continuation of this trend sees Islam set to overtake Judaism as the second largest religious group (other than people who are religiously non-affiliated) in the United States.<sup>26</sup> In Canada, Islam is the second largest religion, having grown from 2% in 2001 to 3.2% in the most recent (2011) census, with an increase of the proportion of recent immigrants who are Muslim.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the association between Islam and immigration in North America, Islam is far from being exclusively a recent addition to the continent, with one of the differences between Islam in Europe and North America being the existence of the Nation of Islam. In spite of Islam’s long history in the United States, information about the early stages of Islam in America are highly politicised, challenges related to the mainstreaming of the Nation of Islam and its association with the Civil Rights struggles for African Americans. As a result, it is difficult to find accurate information about the early stages of Islam in America, something which has proved frustrating for other scholars as well (Leonard, 2003:31). While many American Muslims are of Arabic or South Asian descent, the dismantling of the Nation of Islam in 1975-1976, saw many of its members converting, much like the late Malcolm X, to mainstream Islam. Even after the Nation re-formed, many have continued to see themselves as simply another group of Muslims (see Bassiri

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<sup>24</sup> Goldman, Moshe (2008?). ‘Is the Internet Evil?’. *Chabad.org*. [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/675087/jewish/Is-the-Internet-Evil.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/675087/jewish/Is-the-Internet-Evil.htm). Retrieved 17 May, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Lipka, Michael (2016). ‘Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World’. *Pew Research Center*. 22 July. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/07/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>. Retrieved 27 July, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Mohamed, Besheer (2016). ‘A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population’. *Pew Research Center*. 6 January. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>. Retrieved 27 July, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Statistics Canada (2011). ‘Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada’. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm#a6>. Retrieved 15 June, 2016.

(2010:273). Gary Bunt's iMuslim shows that attempts to make a *halal* internet, while they have similarities to the attempts by Orthodox rabbis, have had limited success (quoted in Varisco, 2012).

Converts seem to be slightly overrepresented in both the Jewish and Muslim blogging networks I study. Religious conversion is more controversial in Judaism than in Islam, which is in turn reflected in the differences between the mechanisms of religious conversion in the two religions. While some scholars have rightly pointed out that Jewish attitudes conversion are more mutable across time than they are widely understood to be (Magonet, 1988, Schulweis, 1999), it remains that Judaism has not been widely proselytising since at least the time of the Emperor Constantine (ca. 272-337 C.E.). Orthodox Jewish Conversion lacks a clear timeline, includes significant costs, and includes being approved by a three-person *bet din* (or religious court). This is not a concern for Muslim converts, as reciting the *Shahada* (the profession of faith) is preferably done in the presence of others, but can also be done alone. Finding reliable statistics about religious conversion has proved a challenge. Heather Marie Akou notes (2015) that converts to Islam are quite rare in North America, though Peek (2005) has suggested that the number of converts is growing. According to Pew Internet Research, roughly as many Muslims have converted as have left the faith.<sup>28</sup> However, many religious conversions in US prisons are to Islam, and scholarly texts have criticised surveys for failing to include incarcerated converts (Leonard, 2003:22): it is unclear whether Pew research takes this into account. Accurate figures for Jewish conversion for marriage have been similarly difficult to find. As many as 80% of Jewish Orthodox converts cite 'spiritual-intellectual search' as the reason for their religious conversion, which is somewhat greater than the 58% of Muslim converts who argue similarly, though only 18% of American Muslim converts cite marrying a Muslim as one of the main reasons for why they convert – Jewish Orthodox conversion for marriage is especially controversial.<sup>29</sup> The overrepresentation of converts in the blogging networks I study might be the result of encountering challenges in fitting in with their local communities, or the result of converting in an offline area which has a very small community, or that there are aspects of converting to a religion that are more fruitfully discussed with other converts than with those who have practiced since childhood.

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<sup>28</sup> Mohamed, Besheer (2016). 'A New Estimate of the U.S. Muslim Population'. *Pew Research Center*. 6 January. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>. Retrieved 27 July, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Heilman, Uriel (2015). '10 Revealing Things about Orthodox Jewish Converts'. *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. 6 July. <http://www.jta.org/2015/07/06/news-opinion/10-interesting-things-about-the-rcas-report-on-conversion-reform>. Pew Research Center (2007). 'Muslim Americans Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream'. *Pew Research Center*. 22 May. <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/>. Heilman, Uriel (2014). 'So you Want to Convert to Judaism? It's not that Easy'. *Haaretz*. 6 October. <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/features/1.619493>. Retrieved 11 July, 2016.

### 1.5 Gender and religion

Historical debates over women's roles in society have long included concerns about how gender roles and belonging is expressed through dress, and continue to do so today. Current debates over Muslim women's modest clothing echo earlier debates about the inter-relationship between women's sexuality and clothing, for instance as seen in debates over the tight corseting in the nineteenth century (Storr, 2002). Muslim and Jewish women are not the only women in Western societies who dress modestly in accordance to religious rulings – some Christian women do as well (Bartkowski, 2003). However, Christian women are not included in this project, and they are very rarely alluded to in public debates about dress. Dress can be understood as a set of symbols grounded in the physical body, therefore understanding more about dress allows us insight to how the social body works (Douglas, 2004). Debates about dress touch on taboos about disordered bodily functions but also body parts associated with sexuality, especially hair. The combined threat and pity evoked by veiled Muslim women in secular activists and academics was critiqued by miriam cooke (2007). Coining the term 'muslimwoman', a character assumed to lack the agency associated with a Western individual, cooke argues that the 'muslimwoman' becomes a target of pity as well as fear, all encapsulated in how she is clothed. For cooke, the 'muslimwoman's' gender and religious identity are so intertwined that they have become the symbol of Otherness in Western societies. While the focus on agency has been problematised (Moallem, 2008), as I build on in this research, cooke's concept helpfully demonstrates the pervasiveness of the Othering of religiously dressed Muslim women in the West.

Dress is an important part of how gender belonging is articulated; enacting and maintaining a gender binary underpins the religious dress practices in both Judaism and Islam. My thinking about how the relationship between dress and gender tangibly affects debates about religious dress in the West were informed by Joan Wallach Scott's *Politics of the Veil* (Scott, 2009). Here, Scott argues that the transgression of the *hijab* for Western societies, especially in France, is closely related both to the roles assigned to women in the West and to the failure to integrate minorities. Scott identifies one of the concerns about the *hijab* being its visual signalling of sexual modesty – a standard at odds with widely held beliefs about what it means to be French (see also Kılıç, 2008). The feminine aesthetics that Scott suggests are associated with French secularism are in contrast with Winter's (2004) argument that the aesthetics of Islam and Judaism encourage that what is valued – in this case, women's bodies – is covered. Debating women's religious dress, therefore, means debating not only the role of religion in the public sphere, but also gender roles and what it means to be an individual in the contemporary West.

However, the sociology of religion was for a long time ostensibly blind to how gender roles inform and are reinforced by religious belonging (Woodhead, 2007), which is a reflection of the fact that gender in general has long been an under-explored element of religious studies (Jakobsen, 2008). This thesis forms part of an ongoing correction of that imbalance within religious studies. The association between women and religion, what Casanova calls ‘the feminisation of religion’ (Casanova, 2011:64), no longer see both confined to the private sphere. Furthermore, while I contest Turner’s argument that much of contemporary religious practice should be seen largely through a lens of choice and marketplace consumption, my primary sources reflect a close tie between gender roles and religious practice which Turner identifies as being an important facet of religion online (Turner in Gorski, 2012:154).

Part of the complexity of women enacting their online identities through religious dress is that self-representation of religiously motivated religious dress on the blogs is not necessarily feminist, nor necessarily done for either strategic or functional reasons. Feminist scholarship has not been unequivocally successful in either showing the relevance of secular feminisms to religious women’s lives or in making feminism a welcoming movement for religious women. One of the early justifications for my research was to challenge statements by academics, such as Marnia Lazreg (2009), who are keen to indict other Western academics as being apologists for religious dress in fear of being seen as being unduly critical of Islam. The strict gender binary constructed through both *hijab* and *tzniut*, its association with women’s bodies being covered and thus concealed, and the systematic exclusion of women from formal religious leadership structures, can suggest that modest religious dress is something that is done *to* women, rather than *by* women. Similarly to Lazreg’s critical stance, Susan Moller Okin’s *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* (Okin, 1999 in Cohen, Howard and Nussbaum, ed. 1999), presupposes an opposition between what Okin describes as the successes of the Anglo-Saxon feminist movements and how group rights for ethnic and religious minorities and rights for individual women are negotiated within multicultural societies. Okin rightly argues that the lived experience within minority groups contains a diverse set of perspectives. However, as Okin is challenged by Seyla Benhabib (1999) in the same volume, where both Lazreg and Okin fall afoul is in the assumption that there is a homogenous set of women’s needs within religious minorities. Consequently, one of the attractions for me in writing about women’s religious dress from an academic perspective is that it touches on twenty-first century feminism’s struggle to meaningfully incorporate the range of experiences of religious, including religious dress (see for instance hooks, 2000, discussed in Chapter Three). Such tension



seems a cognate for how feminist movements struggled to include the experiences and concerns of working class women, queer women and women of colour during the course of the twentieth century (see for instance Lorde, 2012), and an interesting avenue for research. That secular and intersectional feminism needs to take the concerns of religious women seriously, even as it continues to challenge, for instance, gender binaries and gender roles, is an underlying assumption of my research.

Feminist discomfort with women's religious dress practices is not entirely one-sided, however. Feminism is a continuously contested and, importantly, *secular* term, which accounts for the unease of some religious women. Sometimes, unease can be a response to having felt alienated by the rhetoric employed in earlier elaborations of feminism:

During the first ten years of the women's movement, I often used the word feminism to criticize excesses; during the next ten, I'd begin statements with "I'm not a feminist, but..." – though clearly I was speaking the movement's values. (Greenberg, 2003:54)

Greenberg's statement pre-dates the current upswing in populist, feminist writing, especially online, and a future area for research would include whether the proliferation of feminist writing and representation online addresses some of these challenges. However, suggesting a breadth of experiences and reading among the bloggers, some of the primary sources I study reference feminist academic texts about religion in their blogs. Some of them self-define as feminist, some argue for a religiously informed feminism, while others reject feminism entirely and portray their religious practices and belonging as a haven from the contested gender roles they see in secular communities. This variety of engagement with feminist ideas serves as an ongoing reminder about the heterogeneity of voices online, which might sometimes be obscured by the similarity of topics written about on the blogs. It also suggests, as I discuss in Chapter Three, that expressing a view about secular feminism is part of how women's religious identities are enacted online.

As a secular feminist myself, I initially analysed the primary sources as indications of religious women having agency over their dress, their bodies and their religious practice. Much earlier writing around women's, especially Muslim women's, religious dress hinges on the concept of agency (Bilge, 2010), and while Lila Abu Lughod (1999) argues that women do not need saving from religion, she nevertheless suggests that they demonstrate agency through subverting patriarchal religious power structures from within. Arguing for a difference in motivations rather than an abdication of agency, Z. Fareen Parvez (2011) describes the women she studied in a

women's mosque community in a suburb of Lyon as being involved in a form of antipolitics, which she defines as consisting of three elements, 'a reconfiguration of the private sphere against an intrusive state, a retreat into a moral community, and emphasis on spiritual conditions and achievement of serenity' (Parvez, 2011:287). However, not all of the women whose writing I study seem to be political in the way Parvez describes and I have found limited evidence of subverting male religious power structures in women's blogging about religious dress. Instead, when the language and practice of subversion does emerge on the blogs, it tends to be directed at the secular mainstream. What is subverted, therefore, are both expectations of religiously dressed women as being oppressed and meek, and descriptions of religious dress as being used to subvert the unwanted, consumerism-driven sexualisation of women's bodies, which is frequently described as being a characteristic of secular femininity. However, questioning whether agency is a useful framework for analysing religiously motivated practices proved a more interesting approach to the sources.

Moving away from emphasising agency as a consideration in religious dress stemmed from writing on the blogs which suggested that wearing both Jewish and Muslim dress is something women do for a combination of reasons, especially religious or aesthetic ones. Religious dress is part of enacting a differently religious identity, and begs the question of the usefulness of approaching religious dress through the framework of agency or choice if the wearer believes that dress is a religious requirement. Consequently, Saba Mahmood's 2005 monograph, *The Politics of Piety – the Islamic revival and the Feminist Subject*, about the intersection of feminism, religion and secularism, greatly informed how I approached studying religious practice. Mahmood draws on Judith Butler's work to open up the discussion about the links between piety and embodied practice. In doing so, Mahmood questions the usefulness of agency as a frame of reference for studying religious practice, while challenging earlier scholarly assumptions about pious Muslim women being submissive, complicit in oppression or resisting. For instance, as Mahmood points out, applying the formula of subversion to all women involved in patriarchal power structures is simply not accurate. She quotes Mir-Hosseini's (1999) study on Islamic revivals in Iran as an example of subversions of the traditional patriarchal religious power structures, but sees scant evidence of this in her own fieldwork.

Part ethnography of the women's Mosque movements in Cairo and part discussion of how the secular, liberal academy struggles with non-liberal, especially Muslim, women's movements, *Politics of Piety* is a text with dual aims. Mahmood positions her work within the context of the

Islamic Revival. She notes that this piety movement is not limited to working class and/or less educated women. This is one of the important findings of *Politics Piety* for my research, as there is a widespread assumption among American feminists such as Katha Pollitt<sup>30</sup> that women's religious adherence is associated with lack of education, as well as similar considerations by secularisation theorists discussed above. Mahmood takes previous studies to task for assuming that devout Muslim women are working against their own best interests by supporting a patriarchal religious structure. Firstly, it assumes that endorsing a male, hierarchical power system means that Muslim women either do not know what is good for them, or are at least deluded about what is at stake. Secondly, it also presumes that that they are striving toward the goals described by scholars. Mahmood argues that seeing participation in religious practice in terms of the language of subversion depends on all women wanting the same things, namely to subvert the patriarchy according to patterns determined by a liberal consensus. Instead, Mahmood finds that women's religious participation in public religious arenas is both structured by and serves to uphold, and supports, a religious tradition that aims toward submission to 'transcendent wills', which in many instances might mean male authority (Mahmood, 2005:2-3).

Such a definition of agency helps account for why people opt in to non-liberal movements. Challenging the concept of agency in this way has been praised by scholars such as Julian Bautista. He notes that Mahmood's research helpfully removes the need for a binary opposition between resistance and subordination. Instead, such embodied agency by pious Muslim women 'denotes their capacity to craft moral values by enacting corresponding bodily techniques' (Bautista, 2008:76). Such a concept of religiously informed agency has proved more useful for my research than that which underpins otherwise useful ethnographies about conservative religious groups, such as Hella Winston's *Unchosen* (Winston, 2005). Winston's ethnography follows Hasidic 'rebels' who choose to leave the community and its strict confines of modesty. However, Winston does not satisfactorily account for why many stay in their religious communities. Agency is primarily understood as a breaking of norms, rather than of adherence to them. Compliance to religious practice is shown as driven by community pressures rather than spiritual or personal considerations, such as when her informant Dini is called by an anonymous person her about her immodest dress (Winston, 2005:31). While there is no doubt that the pressure to conform to religious practices can be explicit and external as well as implicit, especially in tightly knit, isolationist religious communities, this reflection of Winston's own ideological stance has been criticised in reviews (see

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<sup>30</sup> Pollitt, Katha (2001). 'Where Are the Women?'. *The Nation*. 4 October. <http://www.thenation.com/article/where-are-women>, Retrieved 3 November, 2011.

for instance Klayman, 2008). Developments in religious practice are mainly traced by moves away from Hasidism, with lessening degrees of adherence delineated both through non-endorsed sexual practices. For instance, Yossi, one of Winston's informants, visits a 'happy ending' massage parlour in Manhattan (Winston, 2005:67), and others alter dress and clothing to match secular, rather than Hasidic, norms. This differs to what I have found in my sources, which show women's blogging about religious dress as being non-linear in terms of observance. Blogging can be part of becoming less observant, more observant, or an enactment of the ongoing shifts and developments in being religiously dressed.

In a useful challenge to Mahmood's work, Bucar (2010) draws on Waggoner (2005) to argue that Mahmood underplays the role of individuals in shaping their religious practice. Bucar notes that though Mahmood claims her concept of agency includes an interplay between the expert individual and her religiously saturated environment, it reads as though these women are largely a product of their environment. 'Dianomy', Bucar's term to describe an agency which allows for individual choice and expression within a conservative environment seems an unnecessary neologism. However, her concept of 'creative conformity' has been a useful lens for considering how women enact religious identities that are simultaneously highly personalised, part of an online network and done within the confines of religious orthodoxy.

Making the implicit argument for the validity of a cross-religious comparison by applying Mahmood's work to a Jewish context, Avishai's (2008) study of Modern Orthodox Jewish women's attitudes toward *niddah*<sup>31</sup> and modesty echoes Mahmood's argument that docility, or compliance, can be an expression of agency. She challenges the supposed paradox of women being active participants in their own subordination. Avishai traces this paradox to earlier scholarship being unhelpfully underpinned by a (implicitly secular) belief that religious women are oppressed or operating under false consciousness. Instead, Avishai argues that their religious 'observance is best explained by the notion of religious conduct as a mode of being, a performance of religious identity, or a path to achieving orthodox subjecthood in the context of threatened symbolic boundaries between orthodox and secular Jewish identities' (2008:411). Avishai regards religion 'as something that people do, in social interaction and in the context of symbolic boundaries, regulatory cultural regimes, and institutional structures...' Consequently, seeing a paradox in women's participation in

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<sup>31</sup> The laws of *niddah* are the Jewish religious laws (*halakha*) surrounding menstruation. Forming part of a ritualised sexuality within the context of a heterosexual Jewish marriage, men and women are meant to abstain from sex and touching during the time when a woman is *niddah*, which includes the days she is menstruating and seven days afterwards. Once that time frame has passed, she immerses herself in a *mikveh*, or ritual bath, and can once again touch and resume a sexual relationship with her husband.

conservative religions is only paradoxical to those who do not want to accept religious agency for religious ends:

To see agency, one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing. It suffices to note how members of conservative religions “do”—observe, perform—religion, wherever that might lead. (2008:430)

‘Doing religion’ and ‘doing gender’ are therefore not only related in terms of how religious women enact their femininity but also in terms of the processes employed in the enactments of both. Thus, their compliance is not strategic, but a mode of conduct and being: religious subjects participating in religious practices for *religious* ends.

Drawing on Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (2008), Avishai discusses ‘doing religion’ as a self-authoring project, constructed within the context of social norms and regulatory discourses. Avishai sees a similarity between how religion and gender are constructed:

As in the case of gender, one cannot make sense of religious practices without appreciating the behavioral scripts and cultural expectations that shape conduct. Thus, I suggest that we examine how members of conservative religions make sense of religious teachings and practices by bringing into conversation their experiences and communal narratives of compliance. (Avishai, 2008:430)

Religious personhood is, for Avishai, both enacted in the context of one’s own community and in implicit dialogue with the secular world, since achieving religious subjecthood ‘entails a project of “becoming” through practice against the image of a secular Other’ (2008:424). Avishai argues that the secular Other is an absent presence in her informants’ discussions of their way of life, which is similar to how Asad (2009) discusses the secular and religious as being in constant dialogue. While Avishai does not see this as vilifying the secular, it does function as a clarification of the boundaries between the secular and the Orthodox. The secular is also always present in the blogs I study – enacting religious online identities seems to require negotiating with secular ideas of femininity, dress and the roles of women.

While this is apparent online, it is also a reflection of offline engagements between religious groups and feminism. Both more isolationist religious groups such as Ultra-Orthodox Jews and explicitly integrationist ones such as Modern Orthodox Jews, are in dialogue with feminist thought – if only in rejecting it (Fishman, 2001:131). This can, in turn, be seen in what Fishman calls the

‘sacralisation of Jewish women’s lives’, which sees girls celebrating *bat mitzvahs* or women reciting the *kaddish* (the prayer of mourning recited after a death) – previously unthinkable in many Orthodox communities – and which shows women taking a more public role in American Judaism (Fishman, 2001:139). Similarly, the ongoing debates about the role and importance of *tzniut* in Orthodox Judaism, which is usefully summarised in Rochelle Millen’s review of Yehuda Menkin’s critique of Gateshead-based Rabbi Eliyahu Falk’s stringent interpretation of modesty (Millen, 2009), suggest that dress is an element of this sacralisation. I suggest that the emphasis on *tzniut* on the blogs I study takes its lead from these phenomena. The bloggers use what is for some (such as the Hasidic bloggers) a contested tool, such as the internet. They use the online space to not only providing a counter-narrative about religious dress, but also building online community and sharing information about being a religious Jewish woman, as well as negotiating what that might mean in the context of their own lives and their roles as belonging to a religious minority in a secular, multicultural context, in a way that is both public and distinctly personal. This is especially true for those who feel the need for a different religious community than the one they have offline, either because they are new to it (since they are converts) or because they live in areas where there are few other Jews.

It matters that it is Jewish and Muslim *women* who are writing about religious dress online. While Meyer’s argument (2013) about the role of the internet as a mediation of experience offers a helpful suggestion for how religious meaning is created in online networks, Lövheim’s recent analysis of transformations of religion from a gender perspective offers a middle ground between the mediation and mediatisation theories discussed above (Lövheim 2016). She argues that personal meaning-making is tempered by the considerations of the media, and, in turn, suggest the roles this might have in the intersection of gender, digital media, and religion. Lövheim offers a useful approach to how Campbell’s schema of the different forms of authority online (Campbell, 2007) can be usefully expanded to better reflect the interplay between religious agents and the materiality of the medium. Lövheim envisions,

...a theory of media and religion that analyses mediatisation of religion as a dynamic process where religion is molded by the logic of particular media, but also – in a process of use and negotiation – molds these media to fit its particular dynamic of meaning making. (2016:18-19)

Lövheim notes that the greater visibility of religion in the public sphere is connected to the challenging of strict boundaries between public sphere (wider society) and the private (home) sphere in late modern society. This in turn suggests that the mediatisation of society, whereby all aspects of life (including religion) are brought into the public, by both print media and digital media formats, would further influence gender relations in traditional religions.

Lövheim also considers whether the looser religious associations and greater emphasis on ‘beliefs centered on individual lifestyle’ that Linda Woodhead (2012) argues to be a characteristic of contemporary British religion, combined with the characteristics of mediation by electronic or digital media, might lead to a ‘greater openness toward personal and emotional “expressive skills” associated with women’ (Lövheim 2016:21). She notes that, while some studies show religious women’s use of both print and digital media to reinforce gender stereotypical behaviour, others, such as Whitehead’s 2013 study of Evangelical women using blogs to make sense of ‘secular’ popular culture, shows women taking on ‘male’ coded activities such as giving religious advice or interpreting sacred scriptures’ (2016:22). With the blending and reforming of what is meant by public and private spheres, women’s associations with a more public online sphere would lend itself to changes in the gender roles in traditional religions – even if they themselves conform to traditional gender roles and behaviours. Importantly for my research, Lövheim suggest that this use of the public, or semi-public, sphere ‘seems connected to particular media forms and genres that use a personal address and allows for “female expressive skills”’ (2016:22). She draws on Joshua Meyerowitz’s concept of ‘middle regions’ – spaces where male and female behaviours, such as being a religions expert – have potential to be combined in new ways. I agree with Lövheim that such middle regions are used to negotiate both religious identities as private (or, I argue, personal) and alternative identities to that of the secular mainstream, as well as a public negotiation with both religious traditions. However, the greatest value of Lövheim’s article for my project stems from her emphasis on how conventionally feminine forms of communication may indeed prove to be unusually well-suited to the online space.

However, my research also problematises the strand in feminist approaches to both Judaism and Islam that suggest that re-interpretation of religious texts by women will lead to revisionist conclusions about religious dress practices. Such interpretations of religious texts, which often rely on the discovery of discrepancies between oral and written traditions, have been championed by feminist religious scholars such as Fatema Mernissi (2011) and Susannah Heschel (1995), whether to reject what they describe as Orthodoxy, or offer ways to combine Orthodoxy and *halakhah*

(Jewish religious law) with a feminist way of life. One of the similarities between *hijab* and *tzniut* is that, as I will discuss below, the religious arguments for them are both based in the written traditions, oral traditions, and specific cultural settings. Indeed, recent scholarship around online Muslim communities and the *hijab* (Akou, 2010 and Piela, 2010) and Islam online more general (Bunt, 2003 and 2009) demonstrates how the process of *ijtihad*, or interpretation, becomes an important building block in how religious communities interact and operate online. For Bunt, as religious debates are hashed out online, they are changing the face of Islam, not only in terms of Muslim perceptions of Islam but also in terms of how it ties together the *Ummah*, and the creation of peer to peer networks. Less has been written about the use of Jewish religious texts online, and the comparison between the how textual authority is negotiated in women's blogging networks about religious dress forms part of my original contribution to knowledge. As I discuss in Chapter Four, such religious texts are not as frequently invoked as I had expected, to be both challenged in part or in full, or even cited without question. Such uses of religious texts are not always done for feminist reasons, not does they mean that (even explicitly feminist) bloggers reject religious dress. More widely, the women whose writing I study tend to be less likely to invoke religious texts than male commenters are, suggesting that a gendered interpretation of how such texts are used is a relevant angle for inquiry.

When it does occur, interpretation of religious texts is presented by women bloggers as something they do within a framework they themselves consider 'orthodox' or 'religious'. Investigating the use of religious texts (in Chapter Four) gives further nuance to Campbell's (2007) category of religious textual authority. Thus, I agree with Lövheim that the conservative bent of online ethical communities (Lövheim 2011), informs new sorts of authority – ones derived from the skill-sets relevant to the medium, rather than necessarily those drawn from offline structures. As a result, Lövheim argues for bringing to the forefront combinations of personalised use and financing models in digital media that encourage 'sharing', 'liking' and 'clicking', while admitting that these may simultaneously destabilise religious hierarchies and orthodoxies while reinforce conservative forms of behaviour and interpretation. Gender, therefore, both shapes and is shaped by the 'various outcomes of mediatisation', as Lövheim positions religion online as a personalised and contextualised form of social interaction (2016:25). Therefore, gender is a category that needs to be taken into consideration when studying how religion is developing online.



## 1.6 Terminology of dress

Given the importance of language to how dress is used to enact gendered religious identities in my primary sources, positioning my use of terminology about clothes and other bodily adornments, in both academic debates and ones on the blogs, was an important early consideration. These considerations were drawn both from academic sources and from the language used on the blogs. For instance, while I use the term ‘veil’ in the title, as a reference to covering and uncovering, I use the term *hijab*, both to denote spiritual modesty and the actual hair covering worn, because it is most closely aligned to the language used on the blogs. Similarly, I predominantly use the terms *sheitel* and *tichel* for wigs and head scarves for the Jewish bloggers, especially when those terms are used in the blogs. Hence, I made an early decision to avoid the term ‘garb’, because of its potentially derogatory overtones, perhaps best illustrated in my research by the subtitle of an ironically activist Tumblr, *Muslims Wearing Things*, being ‘Muslims Dressed in their Garb’.<sup>32</sup> ‘Costume’, while the title of the academic journal *Costume*,<sup>33</sup> is more frequently used to describe clothing that disguises people’s identity or in playing a role – as in theatre productions – unlike its early association with folklore and ‘traditional’ dress. The term ‘fashion’ occasionally surfaces in my primary sources as an indication of how dress is produced on rapid, time-based cycles and of how different styles of dress (that include both religious and ‘fashionable’ considerations) are perpetuated. This reflects Steele’s (1988) and Kawamura’s (2004) use of the term ‘fashion’ as being associated with novelty and the study of elite structures, such as haute couture. I also consider the term fashion in connection with the useful concept of ‘anti-fashion’ (Tarlo and Moors, 2013) which, while in dialogue with or explicit reaction against the fashion industry, is nevertheless accounted for within the same neoliberal framework (Lewis, 2015). The timeliness of fashion and consumerism is sometimes actively rejected by some of the bloggers as a way of describing their dress, while others, such as Sharon at *Fashion-Isha*,<sup>34</sup> are comfortable enough with the term to include it in the name of her blog. Consequently, ‘fashion’ is therefore a term I use carefully.

Therefore, I decided to use the language of ‘dress’ to describe what Muslim and Jewish women include in the modest religious practices. I chose ‘dress’ rather than ‘clothing’, as the former

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<sup>32</sup> The blog, <http://muslimswearingthings.tumblr.com/>, shows Muslims dressed in various ways – some in visibly Muslim clothing, others in dress indistinguishable from a secularly dressed Western mainstream, ranging from a Canadian Lieutenant who combines her uniform with a fitted hijab to a topless Aussies rules football player on the pitch. The blog itself is a reaction to former NPR journalist Juan Williams expressing nervousness about seeing ‘Muslims in their garb’ on airplanes. Online since 2010, last retrieved 10 August, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*. Taylor & Francis Online, London. <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ycos20>. Accessed 28 September, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.fashion-isha.com/>. Retrieved 12 August, 2016.

has been used by scholars such as Joanne B. Eicher (1995) to overcome an earlier distinction between Western ‘clothing’ (associated with ‘civilisation’) and other kinds of body modification (for instance, tattoos, scarification and variations in hair styles), which were associated with non-Western societies and therefore perceived as ‘primitive’. While ‘clothing’ can be used in the same inclusive vein as ‘dress’, for instance in Karen T. Hansen’s review of the state of dress studies (2004), I wanted to take particular care with terminology given the political sensitivity of religious dress. It is not only extremist organisations such as the Islamic State that are – inaccurately – described as ‘medieval’.<sup>35</sup> Such language also surfaces in incendiary comments on fashion blogs by commenters critical of the *hijab*.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, using ‘dress’ allows me to include wigs, make up and perfume in my working definition of religious dress, all of which are important elements for some of the bloggers’ enactment of religious femininity online.

### 1.7 Dress studies

As suggested by the previous sections, the last two decades have seen an upswing in the academic study of dress and clothing, notably under the wider panoply of material culture studies. This increase in interdisciplinary interest is evidenced by the publication of the interdisciplinary journal *Fashion Theory* and by Berg’s series (recently sold to Bloomsbury) *Dress, Body, Culture*.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned in the section about gender and religion, women’s religious dress offers a religiously inspired boundary setting, both offline and online, between the secular and the religious, which is one of the reasons why it is a particularly useful lens for studying how women enact their religious identities online. However, dress is not simply a signal of difference and symbolic boundaries. The wider field of dress studies, has increasingly moved away from describing ‘traditional’ dress (often associated with early association with home economics, museums and business), to arguing that

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<sup>35</sup> For instance by former Deputy Prime Minister of the UK, Nick Clegg, cited in this mainstream media been challenged to that description: Macdonald, Kevin (2014). ‘Isis jihadis aren’t medieval - they are shaped by modern western philosophy’. *The Guardian*. 9 September. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/09/isis-jihadi-shaped-by-modern-western-philosophy>. Retrieved 14 June, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.refinery29.com/2015/08/93149/muslim-women-hijab-whisper-app> includes the comment: ‘A hijab is a provocative and sexist garment. It’s basically telling me, as a heterosexual man, that i’m some sort of primitive who cannot be trusted to look at a woman’s hair because i’m likely to be driven into some animalistic sexual rage. I’m perfectly in control of my sexual urges and don’t need them kept in check by a psychotic *medieval* ideology.’ (Emphasis mine). Retrieved 15 June, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Even though the power relations and implications of today’s globalised production and distribution of clothing have also attracted increased scholarly attention, they lie outside the immediate scope of my work. The *Dress, Body, Culture* series, edited by Joanne B. Eicher, began in 1997 (previously published by Berg, since April 2016 published by Bloomsbury) and has had an interdisciplinary slant since the beginning. <http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/series/dress-body-culture/?orderby=4>. Retrieved September 5, 2017.

dress is an expression of inner ideals, to a current focus on how manipulation and strategic use of dress is part of how identity is enacted. I have occasionally used earlier texts, for instance Alfred Rubens' and James Laver's *A History of Jewish Costume* (1973) which I discuss in the section about Jewish religious dress below, both reflecting their ongoing value and in the interest of demonstrating the range of academic approaches to dress. However, the below discussion is done with the understanding that texts approaching dress as ongoing part of identity work, as opposed to those that conceive of dress as expressing parts of a pre-existing self or a readily decipherable collection of symbols, have proved the most fruitful resources for this project.

### **1.8 Dressing for the King and other men – early dress studies**

Earlier understandings of the roles and dissemination of dress can be traced to early sociologists such as Simmel, Veblen (1899) and Spencer, who conceptualised mainstream fashion as expressions of imitations of higher classes' consumption (discussed in Kawamura, 2004). The emergence of ready-to-wear clothing allowed a broader swathe of the population to imitate the clothing of higher classes, suggesting that the link between consumption and dress has long been a consideration in dress studies. Early work on dress tended to regard mechanisms why people adapt different dress and the reasons behind it as secular phenomena, emphasising a hierarchical approach to the dissemination of dress styles. Such imitation could be either reverential or competitive, with competitive imitation indicating a desire to be equal to the disseminators of fashion (in Kawamura, 2004). Thus, then as now, imitation does not necessarily entail that a submissive lower social class mindlessly wears what they have seen among the upper classes.

Surprisingly, the early assumption that women's dress was passive in the face of the male gaze, aimed only to attract rather than to express, has had a long hold in the academic study of dress. Establishing a highly gendered framework, Veblen regarded women's consumption as ornamental and vicarious. Veblen's argument that women's dress is both frivolous and inherently associated with patriarchal domination, as it draws attention to the wealth of the (male) head of household, has remained a pervasive strand of Western, secular understandings of the meanings of dress. Over-emphasising the relationship between women's dress and men's power is detrimental to an improved understanding of women's dress. Such an approach continued long into the twentieth century, for instance in the work of James Laver (discussed in Eicher, 1995). In a religious context, echoes of Veblen's theories can be seen in concerns that women's religious dress is decided by male religious authorities rather than negotiated in conversation with religious authorities, immediate and online communities and texts and wider fashion trends, both religious and secular. In a more

sophisticated framework, Simmel argues that ‘adornment’ is done both for oneself and for others. These considerations are united ‘in one of the strangest sociological combinations’ (in Wolff, 1950:339); adornment can be done for oneself, but satisfaction from adornment requires attention from others, tying together ‘man’s being-for-himself and being-for-another’. However, Simmel argues that adornment and dress are expressions of something internal in the individual, as opposed to dress as being part of enacting and creating a reality.

### **1.9 Dress and the body**

In acknowledging the role that others have in dress, but in rejecting the assumption that it is done exclusively for others, the important relationship between dress and the body comes to the forefront. The growing interest in the body within cultural studies (Turner, 2012) has been a welcome, if complex, direction for religious studies (Roberts, 2006), unsurprising in light of Coakley’s (2000) argument that how the body is presented and given significance is profoundly religious in nature. Part of the benefit of studying dress is that, even in a seemingly disembodied online space, it reminds a researcher of the importance of the body to both gender and lived religion. In the primary sources, the relationship between the gender, the body, religion and dress is an intimate one, not only in proximity but also in mutual influence. To use Terrence Turner’s (2007) description, dress is the ‘social skin’, both part and not-part of the body, with which we articulate our place in society. The relationship between the body and dress is consistently emphasised in contemporary dress studies. For instance, for Entwistle, studying dress without the body is a ‘barren exercise’ (2015), whereas Eicher (2010:3), giving dress primacy, describes the body as an ‘armature, a three-dimensional base for dress.’ I argue that this is especially true in religions where the emphasis is not, as it is in much Protestant Christianity, on faith, but on practice (Asad, 2009). By combining these strands, I consider dress as a lens for how gendered religious identities are enacted – a matter so important to the women whose writing I study that they choose to emphasise modest dress practices even in a potentially disembodied online space.

As I began this project by investigating women’s agency over their religious practices as exemplified by religious dress, I first considered women’s religious dress as a technique of the body and then as a means of disciplining the body. In his brief but influential essay on techniques of the body, Mauss (2006) differentiates between conscious and unconscious techniques of the body, which I initially drew on as a way of making sense of the ways that religious dress would sometimes be written about in very specifically religious terms, and sometimes discussed in terms of how it looks or feels. While useful, it does not account for the need to write about religious dress

online, or how such blogging could be part of the same practice, rather than language being somehow a secondary consideration. Similarly, Foucault's work on the disciplining of the body by structures of power (1977) informed an early stage of my research, but has not been as influential in later stages of my writing. Critically, Foucault draws attention to the association between such discipline and power. While I agree with Foucault that who is doing the disciplining, how, and for what purpose matters, especially between dominant and subordinate groups, his emphasis on external structures as sources of discipline that are then internalised was not easily traced on the blogs. In addition, suggesting that the disciplining of the body through modest dress is external (and male) seems unduly linked to conventional religious hierarchical structures, beyond what is commonly enacted in online religious self-identities. Online, multiple forms of authority appear to be at work, both challenged and accepted. Furthermore, while I argue in Chapter Four that women's blogging about religious dress does not necessarily undermine religious structures as a form of authority about women's religious dress, I did not find evidence that the influence of such structures to justify a primarily Foucauldian approach to the primary sources. Instead, I apply Foucault through Mahmood's (2005) use of his ethics.

#### **1.10 Dress from a cross-cultural perspective**

While not an ethnography, my research is informed by cross-cultural perspectives from social anthropology. Such texts served both as an implicit endorsement for the validity of cross-religious comparison as an academic exercise, and for my thinking about the interplay of dress, society and individual identities. Noting the universality of dress as a human phenomenon, if not in its specific expressions, Cordell and Schwarz sought to begin addressing the marginalisation of dress within social anthropology in their 1979 volume, *The Fabrics of culture: The anthropology of clothing and adornments*. In his article in the collection, Schwarz alludes both to the cross-cultural themes of shame and attraction that come into play when clothing is studied. Including a brief discussion of how veiling can be used both as personal expression and as governing of responses, Schwarz argues that dress has the potential to combine both 'symbolic' and 'rhetorical' power (in Cordell and Schwarz 1979:29). He places clothing within Mary Douglas's framework of symbolic action working through the body, including Needham and Turner's (1967) work on symbols as useful starting points. Notably, Schwarz argues that an anthropology of clothing needs to include not only social contexts and uses, but also the human body and the natural environment in the scope for analysis. I include the former but not the latter in my analysis – the online context I discuss is, after all, far from a 'natural' environment.

Dress had not previously been completely neglected by anthropologists even before Cordell and Schwarz' volume. Jean Comaroff's work on Tsihidi Zionists shows the use of dress as a marker of boundaries both between Zionists and other groupings in the South African region she studies. Quoted in Bowie (2000:72), Comaroff argues that the extreme difference between church wear and the clothes worn for work suggest a desire to return to a situation with clearly controlled social interactions. The creative combinations of both colonial and traditional codes of dress are, according to Comaroff, a way in which, 'The power relations of the established world are inverted and imprinted on the body of a community reborn' (in Bowie, 2000:71). While the power relations of the secular world are not inverted on the bodies of the bloggers I study, they describe that their own syncretistic, religiously motivated clothing practices can be similarly transformative, especially following religious conversion. However, while this effect can be lasting, it is not necessarily permanent – dress practices, while repetitive, are not necessarily static on the blogs.

In another useful example, Strathern and Strathern describe Hagen men and women's body painting as a way in which statements about social and religious values are made (1971). That social and religious values can be related but not necessarily obviously mutually reinforcing, including clan solidarity, prestige and individual wealth in Mount Hagen or modesty and attractiveness in the blogs I study, proved a useful insight. Such interaction between the individual and society, given physical expression in ways which can be deciphered but which also allow for individual creativity, is comparative to the experiences outlined in the blogs. That such symbols can be both culturally derived and imbued with personal meaning dependent on individual experiences and background is explored in Obeyesekere's *Medusa's Hair* (2014) and was a similarly useful line of inquiry. While the dress the bloggers wear has cultural and religious derivation, it also has personal meaning. This is based on variables such as how it relates to how they used to dress, in light of the fact that many of them are not from families where their mothers wore religious dress, or even how it makes them feel in terms of attractiveness, comfort, piety or a personalised combination.

The transformative aspect of modest dress and the importance of sharing the change it simultaneously reflects and occasions in the person who wear modest dress for the first time can be seen in the prominence and frequency what Reina Lewis calls '*hijab* stories' (Lewis, 2013). Here, bloggers describe their early experiences of wearing *hijab*, including their fears about it, why they did it, how it was received by the people in their surroundings, and the importance it has for them from a religious perspective. While some of this phenomenon exists on Jewish blogs, head-

covering, although associated with modesty, is less of an obvious marker of increased or new religious adherence than it is in Islam. Unmarried Jewish women are not required to cover their hair outside of synagogue (married women tend to cover their hair inside synagogue (de Lange 2004:130)). However, the association of modest clothing as a physical expression of religious conversion or adherence is prominent on the Jewish blogs; it is just not always tied in as closely with hair covering, and is not a surprise to their surroundings.

### **1.11 Can dress communicate ideas?**

The ways in which dress can create and convey meaning has occasioned much debate in dress studies. One of the primary questions in the field is to what extent dress is a code that can be deciphered. Ribeiro (1995) argues that, unlike painting, dress cannot express complex emotions. Similarly, McCracken (1990) argues that dress cannot be seen as a language, given that the constitutive parts do not add up to a decipherable whole. He therefore disagrees with Neich's argument that self-decoration works according to linguistic principles, based on the latter's study of self-decoration in Mt. Hagen in Papua New Guinea. For McCracken:

While clothing does bear a resemblance to language in some respects, it departs from it in a fundamental way. Ironically, when clothing most fully conforms to language and its principles of selection and combination, it fails completely as a semiotic device... (1990:64)

However, McCracken's research is based on what I term 'secular dress' and may therefore need to be slightly modified for religious dress, where a linguistic analogy may be more useful than McCracken suggests. While mutable, individual and constitutive of practice rather than expressive of inner realities, religious dress is still more readily interpreted by someone who recognises the different elements of clothing than secular dress. Challenges, joking about and acceptance of how this communicative aspect might function for religious dress surfaces in my primary sources. As a result, the assumption that a person's level of religious adherence can be 'read' from their dress is both embraced and contested. For instance, as the bloggers will point out, there is a limitation on deriving insights about someone's beliefs and personality based on the codes signalled by their clothing, writing that the number of pins one wears in one's *hijab* does not translate directly into levels of adherence and religiosity. This playful sentiment finds more sincere echoes in frequent admonitions to not judge other women's religiosity based on their clothing, an implicit acknowledgement of the limitations of treating clothing as if it had clearly decipherable and reliable codes. Nevertheless, the impulse to draw such conclusions based on their dress is also articulated on the blogs. For instance, it is seen in discussions of how some of the Jewish women cited in blogger

*Kvetching Editor's* 'Tzniut Project' judge their co-religionists' levels of adherence according to their dress. While it lacks the equivalents of strict, grammatical rules that can be combined in the way of verbal language, religious dress does appear to have a communicative aspect in my primary sources.

Furthermore, when the visual signifiers of modest dress and secular (in these cases, sexually provocative) dress are conflated in ways that seem inconsistent to co-religionists, this generates descriptions such as 'Hot Chanie' or 'Hot Fatima', a phenomenon implicitly understood and discussed across religious divides online (Tarlo, 2013). How a woman covers her hair, the tightness of her clothing, or how colourful her outfits are, are all the sort of things mentioned in the muddling secular and religious dress codes related to this phenomenon. Trying to avoid criticising others' dress is related to the limitation of reading dress as a linguistic code, of being careful not to establish oneself as a formal religious authority and also a deliberate way of establishing that the blogs are not somewhere where it is acceptable to speak ill of others. The latter is prohibited in both Judaism and Islam; termed *lashon hara* in Hebrew – violating for example Lev. 19:16 – and considered *gheeba* in Arabic, violating the prohibition in for instance Quran 49:12 against backbiting and slander. Additionally, policing how others wear technically modest dress might not find much of an audience, as other bloggers embrace those very aesthetics as a way of being both 'beautiful' and religiously adherent. I agree with Piela (2010) and Tarlo (2010) that images of the veil are infused with Orientalism, and that there is much more complexity to being visibly Muslim than being simply veiled or unveiled. A sort of 'right to fashion' within a clothing aesthetic that is informed by an intersection of religion and culture is part and parcel of the responses in the blogs.

The interplay between bloggers, their clothing and their perceptions of reactions from secular society has similarities with Dick Hebdige's work on teddy boys and punk clothing (Hebdige, 1979) as the *bricolage* expression of rebel identities. He argues that counter-cultures re-appropriate existing fabrics to signal their identities and group belonging to others in the group and to mainstream society. Hebdige argues that 'anti-fashion' can be part of the construction of a group identity outside of the mainstream of society, without being a formal, top-down, uniform, with all that implies of formal structures of institutional power and obvious conformity. Similarly, women's religious dress is derived from multiple sources and is both an expression of individual tastes, and is part of enacting non-secular ideals of womanhood and piety. Importantly, religious clothing is worn for a wider range of reasons than secular clothing. Looking attractive and identifying oneself as part of a certain religious group is part of the goal, and it forms and informs part of these women's religious practice.



Stigma is another aspect of rebel identities. The occasionally fraught negotiations between visibly different religious bloggers and the secular mainstream them suggests Goffman's concept of stigma (1963) is a useful tool for discussing women's religious dress in Western society. According to Goffman, coping with 'normals' can either be done by minimising the appearance of difference, which is not necessarily something which these women want to do, or fighting stereotypes. Blogging and discussing the complexity behind the decisions to wear religious dress is, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, a way of combating the stereotype of a submissive, oppressed woman which accompanies clothing which is widely stigmatised. Caring about fashion and appearance becomes an unexpected common ground with the secular society they often describe as judging them for being visibly different. Both the Jewish and Muslim bloggers often discuss their desire to be beautiful, stylish and comfortable, within the confines of their religious convictions, signalling shared concerns to secular and religious readers about the role of dress.

Such social, or public, negotiation is part of what Goffman calls 'impression management', the often very subtle ways in which we interact with our social environment. The divide between public and private is also important to secular people, though here the freedom from religious signs is what is seen as important (Asad, 2005). Dress is itself an important part of impression management, which is more nuanced than equating the home with the private sphere and everywhere else with the public sphere. One of the vital aspects of Goffman's work for this project is his recognition of the mutability of what is considered appropriate. For instance, in *Behavior in Public Places* (2008), Goffman describes the different times during which undress and dress are permissible, as well as how this is influenced by surroundings. Women might cover a tight-fitting dress with a coat in the street (presumably even when it is not strictly necessary for keeping warm), to avoid feeling vulnerable or exposed (not explicitly from the male gaze, though this surely plays a part). The same person can be comfortable without any such extra covering inside a nightclub, where the same dress either does not stick out, or where the interest attracts is welcome. However, I argue that such uses of religious dress are not necessarily strategic in the way that Goffman envisions. Additionally, the marking of boundaries between public and private by which dress they wear by the bloggers whose writing I study tend to be more distinctive and done for religious reasons rather than the secular ones in the majority of Goffman's examples.

The mutability of dress is an ongoing theme in fashion studies. By writing about variations in their religious dress, women bloggers enact variations in their changing levels of religious adherence. According to Wilson (2003), fashion is a particularly adept expression of the desire for

change at the heart of life in industrial capitalist economies. Baudrillard argues that the postmodern consumer is not only stressed, but addicted to continually remaking himself and align him (or, in my research, her)-self to small social groups (Baudrillard, 1998). Baudrillard argues that none of us can operate outside the structure and strictures of fashion. Thus, even being unfashionable requires taking part in the fashion structure, both because clothes are produced within the parameters of mainstream fashion. Wilson takes feminism to task for being overly simplistic is its treatment of fashion. She argues that rather than simply being an expression of the subordination of women, fashion has a wealth of political and cultural meanings beyond being a dominant force in gender relations. In the postmodern era, Wilson argues, fashion helps glue together identity. Therefore, while for Baudrillard, the sporting of lifestyle markers is a sign of inauthenticity and postmodern rootlessness, I argue that, according to the ways in which religious dress disciplines the body, it can be experienced as the reverse.

### **1.12 Dress as material culture**

Dress, even when disembodied and written about, is part of material culture, constitutive of culture and human society. Consumption of material goods as a topic of research at all was long undervalued, a challenge that Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1979) and *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai, ed., 1986) sought to address. As discussed by Tilley (2014), culture, social relations and presumably individual expression, do not precede materials, but are created through the processes that create 'things'. They don't reflect culture or identity; they make them. Objects and subjects are in constant dialogue with each other, a relationship which Tilley describes in his chapter on Objectification in *The SAGE Handbook of Material Culture* as 'synaesthetic'. Dress is therefore an attribute of material culture which helps shape our social interactions and, by extension, our identities. Similarly, Miller (1994, 1998) considers it important that things should not only be seen as reflection of what they express or symbolise, but that we access culture through consuming objects that are imbued with meaning. Rose (2011) has criticised Miller and Tilley for offering an extremely secular view which does not readily accommodate a religious worldview. Arguably, religious dress bridges the differences between Rose and Miller and Tilley, by demonstrating that material culture is part of enacting religious identities.

### **1.13 What are they wearing?**

Delineating the justifications for religious dress from the perspective of religious law or jurisprudence, or even offering an extensive review of the complex interaction of textual derivation, historical precedent and cultural heritage that results in distinctive religious dress lies outside the scope of this thesis. Muslim women's online worlds are increasingly well-documented, such as

through the work of Anna Piela (2010) and Emma Tarlo (2013) but, with some exceptions (Seigelshifer, 2011 and Zion-Waldoks, 2015), *tzniut* in general and the Jewish blogosphere that includes discussions of religious dress in particular, is less well-studied. This is especially the case if we look at writing by women who live and operate outside Israel. My thesis seeks to help address this imbalance. In doing so, developing a working definition of women's religious dress was one of the challenges in writing this project. A too narrow definition of religious dress would focus on dress worn by religious leaders or required for religious ceremonies, where they form integral parts of the spectacle of performed religious ritual. A too broad definition includes almost everything worn by religious women as religious dress.

In both Judaism and Islam, modesty rules apply both to men and women. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, this egalitarian consideration is frequently invoked by the bloggers as evidence that while religious communities or individuals might be misogynist, misogyny is not an inherent aspect of modesty rules. Men also wear religious dress, especially head-coverings such as the *takiyah* or *kippa*. However, as mentioned previously, my research is focussed on women's writing about religious dress, which does appear to be more prevalent online than men's blogging about religious dress. While women covering their hair is part of both Jewish and Muslim women's religious dress, a significant difference between the rules of *tzniut* and *hijab* for women is that hair covering for Jewish women is associated with being married, which is not the case in Islam. This is an important consideration in my research which deliberately includes both married and single women. Otherwise, women's religious dress in Judaism and Islam often includes covering similar parts of the body such as the hair, the collar bones and shoulders and knees.

A further similarity between Muslim and Jewish women's religious dress is that, while anchored in religious texts, many religious women do not think it needs to be worn at all. Feminist academics, such as Fatema Mernissi (2011), have sought to show religious dress to be drawn from specific historical patriarchal contexts rather than being firmly rooted in religious texts. Thus, Muslim and Jewish religious dress can often be dismissed as culturally and historically contingent by outside observers and religious practitioners alike with the argument that *tzniut* or *hijab* ought be primarily spiritual in nature rather than practical guidelines for dress. Islam in particular encourages religious practice based on imitation of the behaviour of the Prophet and his followers. Traditionally, the role of the rabbi's wife (or *rebbetzin*) would have been influential as an example for the community, as evidenced by discussions on the blogs I study about the rumour that the wife of Rabbi Soloveitchik, a seminal figures in the Jewish Modern Orthodox movement, did not cover

her hair. The role of a *yoetzet halacha*, a woman who serves as an advisor about the *tahaharat mispacha*, or family purity laws, can include questions of dress, but is a more controversial position than a *rebbetzin* (Ganzel and Zimmerman, 2011).

#### **1.14 Jewish religious dress**

Classifying Jewish women's religious dress is challenging for a few reasons. There is great variation between different Jewish Orthodox denominations; even within those denominations there is frequent debate about how texts should be interpreted based on a combination of contemporary, historical and textual concerns. Concomitant variations in dress among, for instance, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Brooklyn, are significant and obvious to insiders, including considerations like varying length of black coats worn by men of different groups, or the colour and opacity of stockings deemed appropriate for women (Fader, 2009). Barbara Goldman Carrel has shown that women's dress in such communities emphasises 'queenly' or regal representations of femininity (Goldman Carrel in Lewis and Tarlo, ed. 2013:110). As Eric Silverman (2013) shows, Jewish dress has changed extensively over historical time (often according to external pressures); when rooted in religious texts, the ways in which those considerations are practically enacted through dress are often very different. Seemingly arguing against Silverman's discussion of the mutability of Jewish dress as a marker of uniqueness, Biale instead states that 'clothing as a boundary marker of Jewish identity has had an ambiguous history from antiquity to present; the natural tendency of Jews has been to adopt the clothing of the surrounding culture' (2015:24). He consequently argues that distinctive Jewish dress has been the result of Gentile or Jewish authorities enforcing boundaries when they have seemed too porous. It is highly possible that the current emphasis on women's religious dress in Orthodox communities is a result of such seemingly porous boundaries. However, Biale's interpretation is a surprisingly hierarchical one, and seems inconsistent – just because Jewish dress has not been consistent over historical time, his assertion that there has 'never' been a distinctive Jewish dress that did not respond to either rabbinic or Gentile pressures seems unnecessarily combative, especially following a discussion of times when such dress has been distinctive. Furthermore, as Douglas (2004) and Ahmed (2011) show above, the practices of many religious communities shift their emphases in different contexts – the mutability of Jewish dress over time and in different communities is consistent with such findings.

Additionally, as mentioned above, dress, gender and the body have until recently been understudied in an academic context; the increased emphasis on modest dress as an important aspect of Jewish Orthodox women's religious practice appears to be a more recent phenomenon.

The textual derivation of Jewish religious dress stems from both the Torah and the Talmud. According to Alfred Rubens (1973:xv), most of the ‘peculiarities’ of Jewish dress for the past 2,000 years stem from *chukat hagoyim*, the principle based on Lev.18:3:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices.

For Rubens, therefore, Jewish dress is based on the principle of difference, from as early on as the prophet Zephaniah’s denunciation of ‘all those clad in foreign clothes’ (Zeph. 1:8), and that distinctive dress was that ‘so much taken for granted that very little reference of it is made in Jewish literature and most of the evidence is pictorial’ (Rubens, 1973:xv). As both Rubens and later Silverman (2013) demonstrate, there are many references to dress in the Torah – it is however, difficult to accurately identify the exact meaning of some of the terminology have been lost. For instance, what is today called *tefillin* is drawn from the word *totafot*, now widely agreed in an academic context to be some sort of amulet rather than the scripture-containing boxes bound to the body with leather thongs worn by Jewish Orthodox men today (Silverman, 2013:14).

I agree with Silverman that, rather than compiling a ‘laundry list’ of Ancient Israelite clothing, which is possibly not very different to that of the surrounding Mediterranean world, the symbolic uses of clothing in the Torah is of greater interest (Silverman, 2013:5) to how religious dress is used today. According to Rubens, ancient Jewish dress had five distinctive features: *tzitzit* (tassles, from Num. 15:38 and Deut. 22:12), *peyos* (hair locks, Lev. 19:27), *shatnez* (the prohibition against mixing wool and linen, Deut. 22:11), *tefillin* (based on Ex. 13:9 and 16, Deut. 6:8 and Deut. 11:18) and married women being required to cover their hair. However, dress is more often used metaphorically in the Torah, frequently but not exclusively by the Prophets (or in the Psalms, Ps. 35:26 and Ps. 132:9), and often linked to the feminised embodiment of Israel. Isaiah (52:1) admonishes Zion to clothe herself with strength, and ‘put on her garments of splendour’, that the Redeemer will ‘put on righteousness as his breast plate’ (Isa. 59:17) and that the prophet himself has been ‘clothed with garments of salvation/and arrayed [me] in a robe of his righteousness/as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest/and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels’ (Isa. 61:10). Dress is also associated with social status (for example royal dress in Esther 6:8), with certain groups (hairy cloak probably associated with Nazirites, Zech. 13:4), or with phases of life, like widowhood (Gen. 38:14), being a prisoner (II Kings 25:29) or being a priest (Ex. 28:2). In the Talmud, Jews were supposed to change their clothes completely for the Sabbath (Shab. 113a, 114a),

symbolising honouring the day of rest, a sentiment echoed in some of my sources. (Yeivin in Skolnik and Berenbaum, 2007.)

Interestingly, most descriptions of uses and importance of dress in the Torah and Talmud are aimed at men, not women. The use of ‘fine clothing’ to enlarge man’s spirit (alongside a beautiful dwelling and a beautiful wife) is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (Ber. 57b). Looking after and maintaining clothing is important in the Talmud, ‘a man’s dignity is seen in his costume’ (Ex. R. 18:5). Such maintenance of dress was especially for scholars who were expected to keep their clothes and shoes neat, (Shab. 114a and Ber. 43b) and who wore *tallit* (Talmud BB 98a) or prayer shawls, which set them apart from regular people. Again, however, such dress rules appear to be mainly aimed at men. (Rubens in Skolnik and Berenbaum, 2007).

Jewish religious dress rules specifically aimed at women centre on married women’s hair covering. However, the requirement for married women to cover their hair is not only disregarded by Reform Jewish women, but is also contested among other Jewish communities. Whether or not married women’s hair-covering actually has the basis in the Torah that both Rubens and *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Baskin, in Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, eds., 2007) suggest is contested by other sources. For example, Bronner (1993:465) argues that there is no direct mention of women’s need to cover their hair in the Torah, but that it instead developed in dialogue with veiling practices elsewhere in the Ancient Near East. The arguments that hair covering has biblical precedent is largely drawn from the implications of hair being uncovered. Women were humiliated and punished through either loosening or unveiling of hair (Isa. 3:17 or Num. 5:18). Associations between women’s hair and sexuality are more explicit in the Talmud. According to Mishnah Sotah 3:8, men differ from women in that they may appear in public ‘with hair unbound and in torn garments’, and some rabbis compared a married woman showing her hair to her showing her genitals (Ber. 24a). It does appear from some Talmudic sources that married women were expected to cover their hair outside the home (Ned. 30b; Num. R. 9:16), and could be divorced by their husbands without having her dowry repaid if they walked in the street uncovered hair (Ket. 7:6).

How should married women cover their hair? The wig, or *sheitel*, as a way of adhering to the hair covering requirement for women, has long been contested. The *sheitel* becoming a substitute for hair-covering was hotly debated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The sixteenth century Talmudic scholar Joshua Boaz ben Simon Baruch ruled that women were allowed to wear wigs. He argued that hairs which were not attached to the head did not fall under the

modesty prohibitions, and that married woman's duty to make herself attractive to her husband overrode other objections. This ruling was later included in the *Shulhan Arukh*. Leon of Modena's early seventeenth century *Historia dei Riti Ebraici* presumes the use of a wig: 'when they are married, upon their wedding day they cover their own hair, wearing either a perruke or dressing, or some other other hair or something that might counterfeit natural hair' (in Simon, 2011:159). However, eighteenth century and traditionalist Rabbi Moses Sofer of Presburg explicitly banned the *sheitel* for women in his family, supported by his disciple Akiba Joseph Schlessinger in his gloss of Sofer's spiritual testament, *Lev Ha-Ivri*. However, the virulence of the continued opposition to the sheitel from certain rabbinical quarters suggests that the use was widespread, a suggestion that women found the wig to be a useful, and pleasing, way of dealing with the implications of the need to cover their hair. Women shaving off their hair after marriage and covering it with a *tichel* only became common in the Early Modern period among Hungarian and Ukrainian communities. It removed the risk of women's hair accidentally being visible, and meant that a woman's hair would not rise to the surface during her monthly ritual immersion in the *mikveh*, which would mean that she would have to go through the ritual again (Baskin in Skolnik and Berenbaum, 2007).

As Biale (2015) argues, however, changes in Jewish dress have come from both within and without, both in Europe and in North Africa. As shown by Rubens, European sumptuary legislation targeting Jewish communities, including women and was a way for religious leaders to attempt to prevent offending the surrounding (Christian) communities, abide by mainstream laws, and curtail what was seen as excess in dress (Rubens, 1973:188). Pressure to conform and dress modestly therefore has long history of being associated with both external and internal concerns about the meaning of modesty.

### **1.15 Muslim religious dress**

Veiling for customary reasons, of both men and women, appears to have been a feature of pre-Islamic Arabia as well as of Greek and Roman societies (el-Guindi, 1999:149). She also notes that Jewish women veiled and that documents from the Geniza suggest that both Jewish and Christian women were secluded from the public (1999:151). *Hijab*, the term I use interchangeably to mean both 'modesty' and 'veil' is a much more contested term than its everyday usage in multicultural western societies suggests. The Quran has several references to *hijab*, but only one of them specifically deals with a physical piece of cloth. This is Sura 33:53, where those approaching the wives of the Prophet are told to do so from behind a *hijab*, which in this case appears to be a division or a screen. The other mentions of *hijab* appear to be rooted in its (non-gendered) use as a

divider: separating deity from mortals (42:51), wrongdoers from the righteous (7:46, 41:5), believers from unbelievers (17:45), and light from darkness and day from night (38:32).<sup>38</sup> In terms of gendered understandings of modesty, the Quranic verses about modesty that are most frequently alluded to are Sura 24:30-31:

Say to the believers, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts; that is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work.

And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or what their right hands own, or such men as attend them, not having sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts; nor let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, O you believers; haply so you will prosper.<sup>39</sup>

These therefore include both men and women in the need for modesty. However, as el-Guindi notes, it is not entirely clear what women are expected to do. The word for 'veil' that is used here, is *khimar*. A later *ayah* (33:59), explains that the Prophet's wives should draw their *jilbab* around them (el-Guindi 1999:155). Whether or not this exclusively referred to the wives of the Prophet having special status in the early *Ummah* remains debated.

While Muslim men's dress was more coherent from the Ottoman period until early modernity, Muslim women's dress showed significant regional differences. Veiling or unveiling became a questions of westernisation and modernisation by the end of the nineteenth century, with Muslim men abandoning traditional clothing more quickly than Muslim women did, despite the work of Egyptian feminists such as Huda Sharawi, who is said to have thrown her veil into the Mediterranean, according to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2012). Unveiling was more popular, however, with upper and middle class women than it was with women from the lower-middle classes.

While the term *hijab* is therefore not new, it has taken on extended meaning since the 1970's, when it has been associated with the Islamic revival movement. Muslim women associated with the Mosque movement began wearing what was called 'Islamic dress', which often included a *khimar* and a *jilbab*, both opaque and in dark or dull colours. Higher levels of adherence include wearing *niqab*, a face-veil, which covers the entire face leaving only the eyes uncovered. Gloves

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<sup>38</sup> "Muslim Journeys | Item #177: 'Hijab' from Oxford Islamic Studies Online". Retrieved August 23, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Translation by Arberry, A.J. (1981). 'The Koran Interpreted'. London, Boston, Sydney. George Allen and Unwin. For online comparative translations: <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=31>. Retrieved 28 September 2016.



and socks to cover their hands or feet can also be worn, but none of the women whose writing I study appear to do this.

### **1.16 Approaching the sources – blogging and enactment**

The role of writing and literacy in monotheistic religions has been explored by Jack Goody, (1986) who argues the act of writing shifts religious practice. For the purpose of a project that hinges on written sources, be they blogs or fiction, Charles Taylor's emphasis on the importance of articulation in shaping a Western individual was a useful starting point (Taylor, 1989). He argues that what he calls 'the affirmation of ordinary life' has an ethical dimension for people, like the writers of my primary sources, who live in the West – regardless of their religious belonging. Taylor argues that the 'affirmation of ordinary life' is what Taylor terms a cultural innovation, whereby 'ordinary life' is invested with a historically unique importance. One of the implications of this is that daily life for everyday people, rather than the elites, becomes suffused with religio-ethical meaning.

In my reading of Taylor, combining an ethical element – the 'good' – with 'the affirmation of ordinary life' gives an indication of why religious dress has such potentially to offend secular outsiders. For Taylor,

The notion that there is a certain dignity and worth in this life requires a contrast; no longer, indeed, between this life and some "higher" activity like contemplation, war, active citizenship or heroic asceticism, but now lying between different ways of living the life of production and reproduction. (1992:23)

If a secular person's own way of life is invested with the level of meaning described above, then a lifestyle which adheres to a different understanding of 'the good', in effect displaying a different ethical framework, is inherently challenging. The suggestion that affirming different ways of life can be both an explicit and implicit rejection of a secular world view, within a nominally secular public sphere where everyone's every day is imbued with meaning, was a helpful entry point to my research.

Of course, another aspect of the 'affirmation of ordinary life' which made it useful for my research is that it dovetails elegantly with the quotidian nature of women's religious dress. By using Taylor's concept of 'ordinary life' at the forefront of the creation of the Western individual, I show the agency at work when women practice religion in this way. Taylor has been criticised (Skinner, 1991) for giving religion an unnecessarily central philosophical role in Western society. He has also

been challenged for not acknowledging the extent to which he permits his own Christianity to seep through to his work. Fergus Kerr's essay *How much can a Philosopher do?* (Kerr, 2010) offers a survey of arguments between Peter Winch and Steven Mulhall over Taylor. While sympathetic to Taylor's writing, Mulhall argues that *Sources of the Self* should be re-written 'in a form which makes it clearer that it always already was a personal moral manifesto' (cited in Kerr, 2010:332). One of the ways in which Taylor's work has been used in recent scholarship has been within the context of queer studies, where for instance Kathy Miriam (2007) has spoken of the liberating element of the expressivist turn in lesbian-feminist communities.

Bloggers whose writing about their religious dress can be read as counter-narratives to a secular (or at least differently observant) public sphere, argue that mainstream narratives misconstrue them as oppressed, passive, unconsidered or insular and, vitally, in need of some sort of rescuing from their (minority) religious communities. This is true for both Muslim and Jewish bloggers. Danielle Saad's article about the website *Alt-Muslimah* (Saad, 2015) approaches such writing as counter-narratives. While I was initially drawn to Saad's work as a way of articulating some of the strands of narratives and counter-narratives on the site and throughout the blogosphere, dividing the many posts on *Alt-Muslimah* into three distinct categories seems to sacrifice multiplicity and complexity in the interest of clarity. While Saad identifies three main forms of narrative (Dominant Western Narrative, Dominant Muslim Narrative and a Counter-Narrative to Dominant Western Narrative), I deliberately stay away from strict categorisation, in recognition of the multifaceted and evolving nature of many of the blogs I study. These are not necessarily internally coherent, but, as Mol (2002) argues, enacting reality does not depend on coherence. While there are elements of counter-narrative in the blogs, there is little agreement about what a dominant counter-narrative should contain, beyond use of religious considerations for acts of writing itself. Unlike Saad's findings, the main agreement about counter-narratives in my primary sources appears to be in the actions of writing from a first person perspective, beyond individual disagreements.

Saad's use of the term 'narrative' is drawn from Walter Fisher's concept of narrative as a paradigm of human communication. For Fisher, people are storytellers and the world composed of stories that people use as a way of working out how to continue the process of living a good life (Fisher, 1999:272). Therefore, a counter-narrative, argues Fisher (in Saad, 2015:402), arises when dominant myths cannot accommodate for people's lived experiences. To temper the individualistic implications of this paradigm, I employ Arthur W. Frank's argument (Frank, 2013:17-18) that

storytelling is *for* others as much as for oneself. The element of testimony Frank identifies as part of such narratives is part of what he calls ‘the moral genius of storytelling’, namely that when the storyteller offers their experiences, it is as a guide for the other. This in turn means that both listener and teller ‘enter the story *for* each other’ (Frank, 2013:18), as the teller strives to change his or her life by affecting others. This role of telling stories, or narratives, as a means of interaction between self and others is a particularly fruitful point of entry for understanding blogging about religious practice as being both an activist counter-narrative and for being part of enacting religious identities. In turn, understanding narratives as both sense-making and as building relationships with others allows me to support Manuel Castells's suggestion (2000) that the ways in which we build our identities online are the cornerstone of how contemporary societies operate.

While earlier versions of this thesis relied heavily on both an assumption of the importance of storytelling and writing, as well as on both Mahmood and Judith Butler’s (2008) work, reading Annemarie Mol has proved a useful way out of a need for consistency in the texts I study. Narratives and counter-narratives on the blogs are rarely singular and consistent. In her study *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (2002), Mol analyses and maps the multiple ways in which atherosclerosis is enacted in a Dutch hospital. Such multiplicity of enactments are a helpful approach to the blogs as well, as writing on the blogs can include seemingly incommensurate beliefs, such as an interest in dress and beauty together with an ostensible rejection of materialism, or both rejecting judgement while criticising others, all characterised by change and flux, while simultaneously lauding the stability and certainty offered by conservative religion. Mol’s rejection of subject/object divide is particularly helpful – bloggers will for example both say that *hijab* or a *tichel* is ‘just a scarf’ and that it is not ‘just a scarf’, such as in the blog post by *Rabea* discussed in Chapter Three. Such dress thus forms part of disciplining the body, and more than merely an expression of internal belief is also, as Mahmood argues, constitutive of the lived experience.

Consequently, I use both Annemarie Mol’s work, especially where it builds on Judith Butler’s work, as an analytical framework for interpreting these sources. Being visibly religious – through one’s religious dress – is important to these bloggers, as suggested by the deliberate ways in which both Muslim and Jewish bloggers emphasise their religious dress in an otherwise disembodied, online space. Drawing on Butler, I show that the repetitive and stylised blogging and commenting about Muslim and Jewish women’s religious dress can be read through the lens of gender being performed rather than innate. Women’s blogging about religious dress is closely tied to the performance of gender online: lived religious practice both forms and is informed by gender.

I draw on Annemarie Mol's work about how atherosclerosis is multiply enacted in a hospital to show that blogging about religious dress is a way in which a single online identity (as a Muslim or Orthodox Jewish woman) can have multiple, changing expressions that are not necessarily coherent, but which nevertheless are not drawn into chaos. Mol's approach therefore readily extends to the multiple but un-fragmented narratives that are enacted through the blogs.

Seeking to escape the subject/object divide in philosophy through arguing that knowledge is not limited to being held in the mind, Mol suggests that we should spread 'the activity of knowing widely' (2002:50). Therefore, instead of speaking about objects (as things that are known), we should instead analyse how they are involved in the practical enactment of reality. Applying this to my primary sources, then, reality is not only thought, but practised, or enacted; first through engaging with material objects such as religious dress, and secondly through blogging about that engagement. The blogs, then, owe something to the slippery, messy negotiation of life as it is lived. Mol's concept that reality is multiple, enacted through materials and always changing, allows for a level of comfort with the high degree of hybridity of practice and expression demonstrated on these blogs, often without giving rise to confrontation or suggestions that the bloggers are deviating from orthodoxy. These are neither strictly individualistic approaches to religion, nor fixed in time. They are hybrid and changing, but often adherent to religious orthodoxy. The lack of a need for coherence in ongoing enactment is the creation of a reality that is multiple and always being negotiated, which allows for many stories and narratives to be part of a single identity, as the 'manyfoldedness of objects enacted does not imply their fragmentation' (Mol 2002:84). For Mol, as on the blogs, reality moves (2002:156), a position which makes a virtue out of the most complicated aspect of studying emerging subjective enactments of online identities. Vitaly, she allows that the 'permanent possibility of doubt does not lead to an equally permanent threat of chaos' (2002:181). Contingency, she shows, is not disorder. Such incoherent order is enacted and maintained on the blogs. As I show in Chapter Four, such a personalised approach to religious dress does not, however, lead to chaos, as the blogs are self-governing, women-led ethical communities, where multiple forms of religious authorities are shown to be at work.

### **1.17 Conclusion**

One of the benefits of positioning my research within such a multidisciplinary framework is that it does not run the risk of oversimplifying the complex role in which women's religious dress is part of religious practice. Helpfully, an interdisciplinary approach also illustrates something of the various influences that are an intrinsic aspect of how information is shared, disseminated and

altered on the internet. Inevitably, however, taking an interdisciplinary approach to research limits the specialisation into each discipline possible within the limited timeframe accorded the PhD. Nevertheless, as this chapter shows, the considerations prompted by the primary sources sit at the intersection of several academic debates, most of which are in and of themselves worth further investigation. As I show in my next chapter, the primary sources are similarly multifaceted. By analysing them in the light of the academic debates discussed in this chapter, I contribute to conversations about the boundaries of secularism, about the need to challenge divisions between formal religious structures and religious practices as they are lived, and establish the validity of taking both dress and online networks seriously as aspects of enacting gendered religious practices online.

## 2 Methodology and primary sources

### 2.1 Blogs as part of the online public sphere

My consciously interdisciplinary approach to the primary sources owes something to the multifariousness of the web itself. Preliminary stages of my research suggested a significant gap between the wealth and timbre of online writing about women's religious dress from a first person perspective and the often simplistic and entrenched positions taken in both mainstream media and in political debates regarding women's agency when it came to religious clothing. In turn, this discrepancy between representation in traditional media, with its many gatekeepers, and self-representation online, suggested that analysing first person blogs about religious dress was a worthwhile starting point for a project. While, of course, I am writing from within an academic context, I aimed to address this discrepancy by putting women's texts at the forefront of my research. An additional consideration was that there is something interesting at work with the public and private divide, which in and of itself is a division that lies at the heart of both Muslim and Jewish modesty rules. What does it mean, from a religious perspective, that these women, who cover their heads and bodies outside of the home, are happy to 'uncover' this practice in another, disembodied but public, space?

The ease of using blogging platforms was an early consideration in choosing blog posts as primary material. The early fervour for the internet as a democratic medium perhaps best exemplified by John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*,<sup>40</sup> but also among academics such as Jeff Jarvis (2011) or Nicholas Negroponte (in Ebrahimji and Suratwala 2011), has waned among many. This is in part because of the power of what computer scientist and essayist Jaron Lanier (2013) describes as 'Siren Servers', such as Facebook or Google. Such software harvests personal data, uses it and monetises it in ethically ambiguous ways, which in turn

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<sup>40</sup> Barlow, John Perry (1996). 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace'. *Electronic Frontier Front.* 8 February. <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>. Retrieved 14 August, 2016.

affects employment opportunities as well as personal freedoms (Kansa, Kansa et al. 2013). Many of these concerns are shared by critics such as Morozov (2014), who argues that technologists are repeatedly looking to solve problems driven by their own interests, often without considering the wider implication of such technology. Additionally, ongoing challenges to the free flow of information on the internet lauded by early internet evangelists, such as the prosecution of open access activist Aaron Swartz by US prosecutors and his eventual suicide (Kansa, Kansa et al. 2013), as well as suggested challenges to the pricing models for internet access included in the debates over 'net neutrality' (Economides 2007) and the domination of internet giants such as Facebook and Google, serve to temper such early enthusiasm. Nevertheless, a watered-down version of early beliefs in the internet's usefulness for the production and dissemination of information underpin much of my research. Admittedly, the other side of this ease of use, access and obscuring of offline identities and location, sees terrorist networks using the net for distinctly un-democratic purposes, as well as other illegal uses that the so-called Dark Web can be used for (Chen, Chung et al. 2008). Nevertheless, I am poised to agree with Negroponte about the ongoing potential of the internet and mobile technology in circumventing the control of information that is a cornerstone of dictatorships and, more widely, about allowing a platform for a greater variety of voices.

## **2.2 Blogs as medium and genre**

Blogs are thus both the medium (and genre) and the subject of this study. One of my reasons for focusing on blogs as primary sources is because of how Manuel Castells' vision of how we build our identities online pioneering work on the Network Society (2011) will qualitatively change who we are as individuals and how we interact. Blogs have been defined as 'frequently updated webpage[s] with dated entries, new ones placed on top', but, as that quotation finishes, 'that won't tell you everything you need to know' (Blood, 2002:12). The term 'blog' incorporates a wide range of publications, all of which are native to the World Wide Web (the interface built on top of the internet, which is the underpinning technology: the two terms are used almost interchangeably in regular conversation). A genre native to the internet, blogs range from the very amateurish to the highly professional, and while they are increasingly embedded in other forms of social media, blogs demonstrate many of the typical characteristics of online spaces. As danah boyd (2008:126) points out, the four defining elements of online spaces is that they are persistent, searchable, replicable and have invisible audiences, all of which are characteristics of blogs. This range is illustrated in the selection of blogs that I use in my research. According to Geoff Myers,

Blogs are not like personal webpages, because they are regularly updated, and they are not like diaries, because they are built around links, and they are not like wikis, which involve many authors collaborating on one text. They usually have links to other sites on the web, and comments on those links and may have a list of other blogs that might interest the reader of this one. They can contain text, pictures, sounds and video. (2010:2)

Myers adds that his definition of blogs falls short of capturing ‘the enormous range of uses to which they are put, and the discussion they have generated, since weblog sites first become popular in 1999’ (Myers, 2010:2). The importance of social media to global events such as the Arab Spring has gained increasing academic attention (Stepanova, 2011). The role of social media in such events is two-fold – both in building community and in acting as leads and sources of information for those, both journalists and others, who are away from the centre of the action but who want immediate, first person insights in to events. Works such as Jeff Jarvis’s *Public Parts* (2011), are filled with an optimism that the ever-increasing sharing our lives on the internet will be a force for good on a personal level, leading to closer relationships, more transparency and livelier debates. The echo-chamber effect, the negative side-effect of such personalisation of information drawn from online networks, was something that Sunstein warned about in *Republic.com* (2009), where he argues that only reading material that reinforces one’s own prejudices and ideas might lead to the fragmentation of the political landscape. Given the mutually reinforcing bent of ethical communities discussed above, the potential for the echo chamber effect to both offer supportive online networks and exacerbate their differences with other networks, regardless of geographic locations, remains a significant challenge for multicultural societies.

Studying online sources means contending not only with the questions of the public sphere and the private sphere, but also with the relationship between an online presence and an offline one. As Walker Rettberg (2014) argues, while blogs trace their intellectual inheritance to previous forms of creative written productions, such as diaries, they are different in that they are published online. Serfaty (2004) argues that blogs are somewhere where bloggers work out personal but not private issues – a clarification which shows the subtle differences between blogs and diaries, and (rightly) places the former clearly in the public sphere. While I agree with Van Dijk (2012) that social networks online are more fragile and often less intense than their offline equivalents, the relationship between offline and online life is more complex than he suggests. In their edited volume *Digital Anthropology*, Miller and Horst (2013) bring attention to the debates surrounding the relationship between the offline and the online. Rather than being a strictly binary division, they



argue that we live mediated lives, with fluidity between the offline and online spaces that need to be incorporated into studies of the online world. However, while offline experiences of women who blog about religious dress are an interesting avenue for future research, given the focus of my research of pre-existing writing, it falls outside the scope of this project. Furthermore, I argue that online self-representation is in itself a valid subject of academic inquiry, especially if, as in this project, it falls within the humanities rather than social sciences.

Admittedly, the availability of sources was one of the reasons behind my choice of looking at blogs about religious dress by Jewish and Muslim women in a North American cultural context. Nevertheless, while availability of sources makes research possible, it is not a reason in itself for a research project. While I argue that they are creative projects, and of course have precedents in the offline, printed world, blogs appear to be closer to the messiness of life as it is lived than many other forms of media. Such flux and change is reflected in the seeming inconsistencies and fluctuation in dress practices as described by the bloggers. Arriving at this conclusion was not immediate. In an earlier stage of my research, I included novels and autobiographies written by Jewish and Muslim women that included mentions of religious dress. Such texts included novels written about young Muslim women in the West, such as *Love in a Headscarf* (Janmohamed, 2010) and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (Abdel-Fattah, 2007), or ones about Orthodox Jewish women *I am Forbidden* (Markovits, 2012), *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman* (Harris, 2013) and *Kaaterskill Falls* (Goodman, 2009). However, I chose not to include them in my final thesis. Admittedly time-consuming research, especially in parallel with my online research, I nevertheless found reading such texts both enjoyable and informative, and they offered excellent background to the representation of religious dress in writing. Increasingly, I shifted the focus of my research from how religious minority writers chose to self-represent religious dress, toward how the flexibility of online publishing allowed such self-representation to be freed from the constraints of concerns such as a narrative arc, or the finality of a printed text. I found that the neatness of narratives in conventional publishing, be it non-fiction or fiction, sat uncomfortably with the mutability of religious dress practices as enacted online. As blogs are displayed in reverse chronological order (rather than, for instance, random order, or unclear order, as with the current incarnation of Facebook's timeline), it allows a researcher to analyse changes in how the bloggers change over time, a consideration I kept at the forefront for thinking about how women use religious dress when negotiating their online gendered religious identities. While some of this could of course be done through studying other first person narratives, such as memoirs, there is an immediacy about the

language used in blogs (Myers, 2010:67), where ‘lived time’ is marked by terms such as ‘right now’ or ‘this morning’. These draw the reader in to the blogger’s life-rhythm. Of course, all posts also have a formal time and date of posting attached to them, which allows looking at developments in the blogger’s thoughts about religious clothing practices. Additionally, one of the enjoyable aspects of having read fiction and autobiography as well as academic texts about religious texts, was to see these texts reviewed, sometimes critically and sometimes positively, on the blogs. As a serendipitous reminder of the interplay between printed matter and the online world, I ordered a used copy of a book about *tzniut* from Amazon.com a few years ago – only to find that it had once belonged to one of the bloggers whose writing I study.

For the purpose of my research, I was attracted to several aspects of blogs that are not necessarily at the forefront of other forms of media. Current blogging platforms, such as Blogger or WordPress, do not require the user to be able to code in order to set up a very basic blog. This would appear to be supported by the sheer number of blogs on the internet. There is no way of accurately estimating how many blogs are currently floating around the internet, Technorati, a now defunct site that hosted a directory and database of English language blogs, listed 1,313,768 blogs on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012.<sup>41</sup> Those statistics which should be seen as an absolute minimum, as most of the blogs I study were never included in the directory when I cross-referenced. While Google-owned Blogger (one of the blogging platforms common among the blogs I study) does not disclose the number of blogs hosted on the software platform, Wordpress estimates that users of the platform produce 69.8 million new posts per month worldwide.<sup>42</sup> Such proliferation suggests a relatively low barrier to entry in setting up a blog. Blogs offer (often) thoughtful posts about a subject that the bloggers themselves consider important. The quotidian nature of a lot of the content also appealed; studying what someone writes about their daily life and ponderings helped place women’s religious dress, which are at times highly contested both inside and outside religious communities, in a self-generated context which showed how this part of religious practice fit in with the ‘rest’ of the writers’ lives.

### **2.3 Methodology: finding relevant blogs**

I look at around 30 blogs per religion. This proved to be at the upper limit of what was manageable for a qualitative research project. Some of these blogs have remained active throughout the course

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<sup>41</sup> ‘All Blogs Directory’. <http://technorati.com/blogs/directory>. First retrieved October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Retrieved via ‘The Wayback Machine’, September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016: <http://web.archive.org/web/20121028234040/http://technorati.com/blogs/directory>

<sup>42</sup> <https://wordpress.com/activity/>. Retrieved 26 August, 2016.

of my research, some have been taken offline or set to 'Private' (requiring readers to request permission from the blogs writer) since I began my research and some are dormant, in that they have not been updated recently but have been left online in the public domain. I chose to study writing both by both converts and women who had been born into their religious communities. A third category of women, namely ones who have been born into their religious group, raised secular but who have since become more observant, are also included in my research. Originally, this was a reflection of the blogs that surfaced in my research, as converts appeared to be slightly overrepresented in the blogosphere, but later became a way of investigating what differences, if any, there were between the ways in which they described the roles that religious dress plays in the online identities on women who are born into a religious community and those who, in one way or another, have become practising as adults. While I do not explicitly study the blogs by men that are occasionally mentioned in these networks, they exist, such as [hijabman.com](http://hijabman.com) or [frumsatire.net](http://frumsatire.net). Men also comment on blogs by women, often supportively, but occasionally critically, as discussed in Chapter Four.

The first step of my primary research included a Google blog search, using search terms related to modest dress in Judaism and Islam. The Google blog search function was a way of searching blogs, rather than all content on the web, but has since been discontinued.<sup>43</sup> Searching for relevant blogs and blog posts is slow work. The search terms I used (such as '*hijab*', '*my hijab*', '*tzniut*', '*frum*', or '*sheitel*') are not necessarily 'tagged' in the posts, meaning that they often do not show up in searches. I later expanded the search terms based on words related to religious dress that surfaced in the blogs, including '*hijabi*', '*niqabi*', '*frummie*' and '*modesty*', and references to other kinds of religious dress, including '*burkini*' and '*snood*'. Spelling, grammar and transcription of non-English terms are sometimes less consistent than they might be on a professionally edited site, which in turn can make searches tricky. This is not, however, a hard and fast rule: the writing and editing levels on some of the blogs are to professional standards. I have also searched through blogs that I have decided to include for where they mention relevant subjects which may not be necessarily use the specific terms, and check the ones that are still being updated frequently. As

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<sup>43</sup>This feature was discontinued as a stand-alone tab on Google search in 2014: Schwartz, Barry (2014) 'Google Blogs Search Now within Google News Search.' *Search Engine Land*. 29 August. <http://searchengineland.com/google-blog-search-now-within-google-news-search-202202> (Retrieved 25 August, 2016). It remains available as a refined search option under the 'News' tab. While the workings of this search functionality is characteristically obscure, it appears to apply excessive traffic filters. Thus, none of the first person blogs I study, even the ones that are still being updated, show up when I type in the search terms. Instead, this search functionality appears to be focused on blogs associated with more magazine-like blogs, such as Muslimah Media Watch, <http://www.muslimahmediawatch.org>, or The (Jewish Daily) Forward, <http://forward.com>. Retrieved September 18, 2017.

some of the blogs are or have been updated quite rarely, signing up to RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds did not seem necessary, but is something I would recommend researchers to do in future.

Originally, I compiled the equivalent of ‘clippings’ from relevant blogs, organised according to their content. While useful for preserving the actual texts I was studying (from, for instance, deletion or expiration of domain names), that method does not give a sense of who is reading what or of the particular timbre and feel of the communities. As I note below, I also consider citing from material deleted during the course of the research to be ethically a grey zone. Instead, I began compiling a spreadsheet of blogs that contained blog posts that matched my search terms. I then used a snowballing approach to gathering blogs to include other blogs that seemed relevant. The intention behind doing this was to get a clearer idea of how women wrote about religious dress, who they linked with, the topics they featured, on their blogs and how they interacted with each other online – both as individuals and as sometimes overlapping communities of bloggers. Thus, I would work from one blog that seemed relevant, and look at the blog roll and commenters to find other bloggers that engaged with the other bloggers in the network.

#### **2.4 Search engines and traffic**

One of the challenges of the internet, or rather of search engines, is that they privilege the strong over the weak. At the same time, traffic does not guarantee quality nor does it necessarily reflect the lived experience on blogging networks, or even reflect the impact the blogs might have on individual reader’s lives. What traffic *does* influence, however, is how easy a blog is to find. In other words, they are designed to respond to search terms by ranking the sites in terms of relevance, which is defined in terms of traffic to the site. This in turn influences how easy a site is to find, which has an impact on the perceived gap between mainstream media reporting and the available first person narratives about women’s religious clothing that informs my thesis. While there is a tendency in writing about the internet to write about how information is either lost or un-mappable due to the vast scale of the internet, an important consideration for my research is that blogs, especially relatively small ones, rank very low on a general Google search. While it is difficult to accurately estimate the traffic to the blogs I read, as I am not an administrator on them but ‘merely’ a reader, they fall very low down in a Google ranking.

#### **2.5 Reading the comments**

One of the main differences between online media and print, radio and television is not simply that they have lowered gatekeeping functions, but also that the online space is not a broadcast media in

the same way as, for instance, television. Beyond the blog posts themselves, many blogs also have a 'Comments' section, where readers can post responses and questions, in their own time. While these sections did not originally attract much of my attention, they show how interactions in loose online communities built up on the blogs, and give a clear indication that the people on each other's blog lists (suggestions for readers of the blogs of other blogs they might find interesting) actually read the posts and continue the conversation in a public forum. Consequently, I have drawn on them as part of explaining how authority is enacted online, in Chapter Four. Responses and discussions posted on the blogs indicate that regular readers, while they may not 'know' the blogger offline, have a recurring relationship with the blogger in an online context. Judging from the blogs I study, I would argue that they form relatively weak and occasionally contentious networks. The fact that many bloggers vet responses before allowing them to be visible to other readers is an example of how different conversations and responses in the online sphere are to ones either in the offline public or private arenas.

## **2.6 Developing research questions based on concerns in sources**

Developing research questions drawn from the sources rather than using the sources to answer my own questions about religious dress became an increasingly important concern during the course of my research. While my research is not an ethnography, I nevertheless found myself cautioned by Benard's criticism of Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* which hinged on perceived weaknesses in Mahmood's fieldwork (Benard, 2007). Although excessively critical of an interesting and ambitious work, Benard argues that *Politics of Piety* reads as a test case for Mahmood's theories, rather than the reverse. I agree, however, that sometimes Mahmood seems to accidentally reinforce an intellectual tradition which upholds wide historical and cultural processes over that of the lived experience – talking about how we talk about others, rather than letting others talk. Remembering that, with all the best intentions, I too was writing *about* women's writing and that my work is inevitably coloured by my own views and background, I deliberately tried to circumvent this challenge by beginning my project in a very open-ended fashion. Additionally, while my approach to the sources is derived from issues raised by my readings of the continuous first person blog sources, the questions I pose are not necessarily consistently discussed. Most blogs contain discussions about religious dress as one topic among many raised by the writer. In part, this indicates that religious dress is one aspect among many others of religious and daily practice negotiated by the women whose writings I study – albeit one, as I discuss in Chapter Three, that has a disproportionately frequent role in how women enact their online religious identities.

However, my initially open-ended approach to the primary sources is also a reflection of the unsystematic nature of most blogs, which often contain inconsistent or dead-end posts, where a thought about religious dress will be brought up with a promise of follow up and then never be alluded to again. Blogs are not necessarily a medium wherein bloggers examine every aspect and angle of a problem; they are instead somewhere where people write about things that happen to be weighing on their minds right then. This means that even the most erudite and intellectually curious of bloggers might allude to something which raises interesting questions from the perspective of my research, and then not touch on it again. Rather than simply leave such questions aside, I have chosen to explore them on other blogs, where they might prove to be one of the few posts relevant to my project. Therefore, while my emphasis has been on first person blogs ostensibly written by Jewish or Muslim women that run over at least a few years with a relatively large number of postings about religious clothing, I have also chosen to include salient posts from more magazine-like blogs, such as *Muslimah Media Watch*,<sup>44</sup> *Alt Muslimah*<sup>45</sup> or *Refinery 29*,<sup>46</sup> reflecting the roles such blogs play among the bloggers whose writing I study.

## **2.7 Research challenges and ethics**

Messy, unstructured, rapidly evolving and almost endless, the online world may be increasingly important to the study of religion and religious practices, as discussed in Chapter One, but it does not readily lend itself to academic inquiry. Trying to resolve the nature of my sources with academic requirements is a real challenge, one which is felt by anyone who studies online phenomena within an academic setting. In the interest of ensuring that my research did not transgress any ethical boundaries, this project was submitted to the King's College Research Ethics approval board. It was found to not require any ethical approval, as the sources have all been published in the online public domain.

However, it would be disingenuous to pretend that research ethics for using online sources are not currently under debate in the academic community, and may be subject to change in future; unsurprising given the relative novelty of widespread internet usage and consequent academic inquiry. While blogs can be studied from a social scientific perspective, where the researcher strives to study the whole person (an approach espoused by Miller and Horst, 2012) they can also be approached through a humanities one, where the written word is analysed in isolation, and there is an assumption of agency on behalf of the blogger (Serfaty, 2004). As noted by the Association of

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.muslimahmediawatch.org/>. Retrieved 15 July, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.altmuslimah.com/>. Retrieved 17 September, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.refinery29.uk/>. Retrieved 17 September, 2016.

Internet Researchers *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* guidelines, such differences in disciplinary approaches shift the ethical considerations of the researcher:

This interdisciplinary approach to research leads, however, to a central ethical difficulty: the primary assumptions and guiding metaphors and analogies - and thus the resulting ethical codes - can vary sharply from discipline to discipline, especially as we shift from the social sciences (which tend to rely on medical models and law for human subjects' protections) to the humanities (which stress the agency and publicity of persons as artists and authors). (AoIR, 2002:3)

While this project takes an interdisciplinary approach to the primary sources, it falls more closely within a humanities rather than a social science framework, as I consider the act of writing and publishing itself as an expression of a form of agency on by the bloggers.

I exclusively study works that have been published to the public domain, and are not password protected. As the AoIR argues: 'the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.' While espoused by researchers such as Mia Lövhelm (2005) and, apparently, Daniel Varisco (2010), Anna Piela (2010) suggests that using online sources for academic research without informing the person behind the work is unethical, as the work is being used for a different purpose than it was originally intended. While I respect and draw on Piela's work in other aspects, I disagree with this stance. Anything which has been knowingly published without password protection is in the public sphere, and thus fair game, assuming proper attribution. Anyone who is sufficiently internet savvy to run a public blog or have a Tumblr account has not only accepted the terms and conditions associated with posting, but has also actively published their work in a public sphere. There are simple steps to ensure that a blog is only open to a limited readership; if those have not been taken, the blogger is clearly not concerned about online privacy. I save them through cataloguing links, mapping how they are interrelated and copying the relevant texts, which I will then destroy once the project is finished.

One of the ethical questions (Nissenbaum, 2010) that surrounds digital research is the expectation of privacy in context. Ethical considerations in internet research, according to the Association of Internet Researchers (2012), are best done on a case by case basis, taking in to consideration potential harm to the writers. Some researchers have noted that certain bloggers consider their blogs to be 'part of them' (AOIR 2012:5). However, it is worth questioning how far to take this analogy in the blogs I study, especially given that many of the bloggers I study have a citation policy on their blogs, where they specify how they want their work reproduced, usually in line with the 'digitally native' Creative Commons licence. Additionally, such alerts mean that the

impulse to anonymise (drawn from more traditional, offline ethnographic research) the primary sources should only be done on a case by case basis.

## **2.8 Right to be forgotten**

The ‘right to be forgotten’ remains a challenging area of ethics on the internet, and the ongoing selling of personal data, data leaks and rapid changes in Terms and Conditions for online products is legally contested and frequently debated in both courts of law and software development companies. Drawing on considerations about both the difference in media between a printed thesis and an online, seemingly more ephemeral blog, I do not include texts that the bloggers have removed from their blogs. However, the ephemerality of blogs and online materials can be illusory, as many deleted blogs remain accessible through the Internet Archive or the Wayback machine. Nevertheless, I do not quote directly from them or from blogs that have been set to ‘Private’ in the course of my research in the final version of my thesis. When I do allude to them in the main text of the thesis, I have anonymised these sources. Thus, regardless of the ‘Retrieved’ dates in blog references, all blog posts bar one (which I clarify), were online in the public domain as of 30 August, 2016, although I have of course returned to check them before submission. Though this has slowed my progress, I considered it to be an ethically important position: if something is no longer in the public domain, it does not fall under the constraints I placed on my research. While I recognise that the completion of this thesis would mean that these quotations and discussions would be available, through my research, in a more static form, it nonetheless as closely as possible reflects the realities of writing about online phenomena. For the bloggers who give both their first and last names, I have included their first names and the names of their blogs. This makes it easy to find them, should their blogs still be online, but also means that they will not remain easily searchable based on their full names long after this thesis is completed. It also helps stylistically, as a writing device to reflect the informality of these networks.

## **2.9 Fair use and quotations**

In writing up my research, the awkwardness of shoehorning an online genre into an offline one such as a bound PhD thesis repeatedly made itself felt. Choosing to use a framework that was ‘digitally native’, my use of the primary material falls broadly under Creative Commons’ ‘fair use’ policy, as well as being within the ramifications of general UK copyright rules. Much of the awkwardness came from how much meaning is lost when the ability to hyperlink directly to a document is removed. This sort of click-through intertextuality, or ‘digitextuality’ (Everett, 2015) does not only add different layers of meaning and, often, humour to posts, but is also a well-established way of giving credit where credit is due on the internet. Had I been another blogger, I could simply have



linked to the posts I was citing, and they could respond to my post or address perceived misrepresentations in the comments section. While there are initiatives trying to bridge the differences between academic formats and online publishing formats, including the (often overly wordy) academic blogs and even academic social networks such as Academia.edu, formatting the thesis to satisfy the internal logic of the blogosphere rather than the PhD committee seemed a potentially perilous approach.

However, while some of the bloggers are pursuing academic degrees themselves, using academic language on blogs often feels very stilted and, to my mind, does not make best use of a medium that offers the scope for extended but informal discussions. Respecting the authority of the bloggers as writers also led to one of my, potentially controversial, stylistic choices. When I quote directly from the blogs, I have chosen to retain the original spelling, formatting and punctuation and to not mark my recognition of grammatical or spelling errors with [sic]. To do so seemed pedantic, especially given that [sic] is frequently used ironically online. The language that they use is one of the ways in which they enact their online identities, and a future avenue for research would be an investigation into the use of non-English language terms on such blogs, as both an identity marker and a signal of group belonging.

## **2.10 Geographical boundaries – or not**

The supranational dimension of the internet makes it difficult to ensure that the primary sources I study in fact map directly on to the geographical boundaries I originally delineated. To try to counteract at least the language element of what Miller and Horst (2013:20) have rightly pointed out regarding the ongoing privileging of North American or European imaginations in digital anthropology being a form of continued dominance, the project was intended to offer a comparison of bloggers writing in Sweden, France and the United States. Such a delineation had a view to offer a comparative perspective between Jewish and Muslim bloggers in different cultural (albeit secular) and linguistic contexts, at least challenging the dominance of English language writing in the blogosphere. However, while interesting and a venue for future research, including French and Swedish bloggers became practically unmanageable within the scale and timeframe afforded the PhD.

Some of the challenges that arose at the early stage are relevant to the current delineation of the sources. Very few bloggers explicitly state where they live. Especially on English language blogs, readers are often from around the world. While anything written in Swedish is likely to be written by someone who either lives or has lived in Sweden (given the small number of native or

near-native Swedish speakers), English and French are a different story. For instance, there is a ‘*hijabi*’ blogging population in Canada, who are linguistically indistinguishable from US or French bloggers. However, this does not need to be considered a problem, as one of the aspects of working in the online space is the fluidity of geographical boundaries. Being overly restrictive about geographic boundaries is not only counter-productive in the context of this project, but also insensitive to the nature of the sources. Where possible, I have attempted to find out where the writer is based from either mentions in posts or from the ‘About Me’ sections on the blogs. I have deliberately avoided trying to locate any of the blogs based on their IP addresses: if they do not mention their geographic location in writing, they either do not consider it relevant to the reader, or want it to remain private. Furthermore, tracking via IP addresses is inexact, and recognising that this is possible requires a higher degree of computer literacy than setting up a blog. I have occasionally chosen to include interesting blog posts where I have not been able to discern their offline geographic contexts, with the admission that they are not directly within the remit of the boundaries selected for this project. I have also continued to follow blogs where the bloggers have moved outside of North America.

### **2.11 The real death of the author?**

Beyond the unsystematic nature of the internet, a supposed challenge which springs from online sources is the lack of clarity surrounding their authorship. Initially, I did not consider this a problem, arguing that if you regard blogs as first person narratives, you are reading them in the way that their intended audiences do. In fact, this actually serves as a useful reminder to consider blogs as creative works in a first person voice, rather than as traditional autobiographical writings, although the scandal surrounding the identity of author JT Leroy in 2005 suggests that print media is not immune to obfuscation either. I later found, at academic conferences, that the difference between the person and the writing is not as widely accepted as I had believed. I realised that this disjunction between my arguments and those of my interlocutors was in part because I am more an online insider than I had originally considered. Outside of doing this research project, I have worked for many years as a writer and journalist. During the past six years, much of that has included ghost-writing blogs and social media feeds for a range of different clients. This includes two and a half years working for the Government Digital Service in the United Kingdom as what is nebulously called a ‘creative strategist’ as well as ghost-writing material about the future of the internet, broadcast on the BBC. I include this less as a list of accomplishments, and more as admission that while I do not wear religious dress (I am a secular, part-Jewish, cisgender white middle class woman who grew up in Sweden, Canada and the United States, largely in a self-

consciously multicultural, international school setting), I am nevertheless someone who is an insider in the British tech community.

While part of my work sees me working closely with software developers, the creation of authenticity online is very much my profession – for those who build and think about software, both inside and outside the UK government. My first-hand experience of writing, among other things, blog posts and social media updates for a range of other people – and the repeated surprise from people about the very extensive use of ghost writers in business, politics and the creative industries – means that I do not assume that these bloggers are exactly who they say they are. The ethics of ghost-writing and editing other people's blogging is an area that deserves more debate and attention, especially in terms of labour rights and remuneration. However, it does mean that I take the bloggers' creative production seriously, and have an insider's understanding of where such activities fall within the wider ecosystem of the internet: writing on the internet is an enactment of identity, which does not necessarily adhere to the standards of writing and grammar encouraged by conventional gatekeepers, but which nevertheless is increasingly a part of how societies operate.

## **2.12 Blogs in a social media setting**

The online ecosystem is increasingly worth its name given the proliferation of various, interlocking and mutually supportive social media platforms. While I focus on blogs, I recognise that these are often only a part of some of the blogger's online identities. With the growing popularity of image-driven social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr, the visual dimension of the internet, which only a decade ago was dominated by text, is becoming an increasingly important consideration, and one which is reflected on some but not all of the blogs I follow. Including visual representations of the bloggers in my research was beyond the scope of this project, though I do analyse the use of aggregating visual material, sometimes referred to as 'memes', as a form of authority in Chapter Four.

Blogs do not only link to other sites, but are also entrenched in other forms of social media, which in turn have extensive uses both for the maintenance of online identities and for the media. For instance, some of the blogs are linked to Facebook pages (either for the blogger herself or a themed one) or to Twitter accounts. The micro-blogging site Twitter, launched in 2006, now boasts more than 500 million users globally.<sup>47</sup> 'Tweets', posts the length of a text message, are composed of 140 characters or less. However, while Twitter has often been lauded as the 'death of blogs', this

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<sup>47</sup> Lunden, Ingrid (2012). 'Analyst: Twitter Passed 500m Users in June 2012; 140m of them in US; Jakarta 'Biggest Tweeting' City'. Techcrunch. 30 July. <http://techcrunch.com/2012/07/30/analyst-twitter-passed-500m-users-in-june-2012-140m-of-them-in-us-jakarta-biggest-tweeting-city/>, Retrieved 16 March, 2016.

prophecy is far from being fulfilled.<sup>48</sup> Facebook is almost too ubiquitous to require description. With a reported 1.59 billion users, Facebook originally launched in 2004 to a limited, college-based audience and then extended to all people over 13 with functioning email addresses. However, I have chosen not to include Twitter and Facebook as central elements of my research. Initially, I followed some of the bloggers whose work I read on Twitter, as well as journalists and other seemingly relevant tweeters suggested by the site. (Suggestions for ‘Who to Follow’ are predicated on an unclear set of considerations but seem to be a combination of tweeters with a high volume of followers, ones who are similar to the ones you already follow in terms of interests and subject matter of their tweets, and on whether or not they follow or are followed by tweeters similar to you). One of my concerns about including Twitter is the speed at which the micro-blogging site is updated. More importantly, however, as the frequency of updates could be controlled by the number of tweeters followed or on setting time-limits on which tweets to study, the software’s limitation about the length of messages means that in-depth conversations are either precluded or linked to blogs or other websites. My concern about focusing my research around Facebook is about privacy in context, as well as reflecting my more recent concerns about the ethics of Facebook’s real name policy.<sup>49</sup> Concerns about what the AoIR, cited above, refers to as ‘privacy in context’ is also related to why I have chosen not to include chat groups. While both are excellent sources of information and play a large role in people’s online lives, they are often not strictly speaking in the public sphere. While joining them is often not very difficult, including either a request to the administrator of a group or using a personal Facebook account to follow public or private pages, doing so would have been against the early argument that my research was to reflect information which genuinely was just a Google-search away, as a way of showing that varying viewpoints on women’s religious clothing are far from being esoteric.

### **2.13 Interviews and secondary sources**

Since I am primarily interested in the online space as an alternative space of communication and identity, I have chosen not to interview the people involved in the blogs. This is not an uncontroversial standpoint. One of the reasons for this was that such secondary material was readily available in the public sphere, including works by Lynne Davidman (1991) and the collection *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim* (Ebrahimji, 2011). The fact that there is so

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<sup>48</sup> Thompson, Derek (2009). ‘Does Twitter make Blogging Obsolete?’ The Atlantic. 22 May. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2009/05/does-twitter-make-blogging-obsolete/18132/>, Retrieved 16 March, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Holpuch, Amanda (2015). ‘Facebook Adjusts Controversial “Real Name” Policy in Wake of Criticism’. *The Guardian*. 15 December. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/15/facebook-change-controversial-real-name-policy>. Retrieved 25 August, 2016.

much online, first person content about a topical issue readily available, and that these are either under examined or disregarded by media and legislators, was in and of itself one of the original questions when I began this project. Additionally, I have chosen not to comment on any of the blogs while going through them and collecting primary sources, as I do not wish to inadvertently influence the direction of the conversations and directions of the discussions.

#### **2.14 Methodological drawbacks**

My methodological approach is not without its drawbacks. Firstly, as the blogs are either being updated or retired throughout the process, choosing when to stop reading or what to retire has been a challenge. I chose to continue reading new material until the final round of edits before my submission, which inevitably slowed progress. Secondly, there is the challenge, among an almost endless number of sources, of which texts to select. I chose to draw on a wide range of sources, which I will discuss in more general terms in this chapter. Including such a range of blogs helped give me a sense of wider trends in the blogging networks. By contrast, for future research, I would probably focus on a smaller number of blogs, in the interest of both time management and focus of the research. A quantitative analysis of use of key words over time would also be an interesting complimentary research project. However, one of the challenges of focusing too narrowly on a few blogs was a concern that they would no longer be updated, or would cease to write about religious dress. The latter has proved not to be the case. Instead, it appears that, for the majority of women who write about religious dress, it remains an ongoing concern, rather than something that is brought up once, which I discuss in Chapter Three.

In a challenge also encountered by Anna Piela in her work about Muslim women online (Piela, 2010), it is very easy to slip in to giving undue weight to writers who are ‘like’ oneself; in this case, someone who is relatively well-educated and comfortable in expressing herself in writing. Remaining thus vigilant about sources driving my questions, rather than searching for answers to my questions in women’s writing, is a challenge made more acute by the fact that I am not myself a woman who wears religious dress. I have tried to remain vigilant that I do not simply select texts, or portions of texts, that support my developing views about the topics I am discussing. One of the limitations of my research is that, despite the best of intentions to draw attention to groups whose voices and perspectives are, I believe, underrepresented in contemporary mainstream media, it privileges women who not only have access to computers and the time to write (although some portend to do so in secret, not only concealed by a blogging pseudonym, but against the expressed mores of their offline communities), but who also are confident in using blogging software and

expressing themselves in writing. The ease of publication of blogs can give a researcher a false sense of having circumvented entrenched structures of privilege, when in fact some of the markers of privilege (such as confidence and writing skills), can subconsciously be something that draws you to certain bloggers. I have attempted to address this not only by reminding myself of the ease with which I fall into that trap, but also by refocusing my attentions to blogs that I originally may have not taken very seriously because they seemed light on content and poorly written (a value judgement clearly stemming from my own privilege) but which have a fair amount of traffic and comments, suggesting that something about them attracts and maintains the interest of the blogger's online community. This requires a large dose of humility about the primary sources; I can try and portray the bloggers' pre-occupations and concerns as accurately as possible, but I certainly do not always understand what drives them.

### **2.15 Blogging networks as primary sources**

This project has therefore developed into being a study of how women enact differently religious online identities through blogging about religious dress: ongoing, autobiographical narratives which show development and change in a highly physical side of religious practice, unfolding in a disembodied online space. While the primary focus of my work is the message rather than the medium of these blogs, some mapping of the networks I study helps give a sense of the raw material that forms the basis of my research, beyond the cited texts themselves.

Appendix One (divided up into two sections, one about Jewish blogs and one about Muslim blogs), offers overviews of the two networks I study. As mentioned above, I chose to cap the lists at around 30 per network. As anyone who studies online phenomena can attest, there is almost unlimited material online, and a constant struggle for a researcher between adding too much or of being too strict with sample size; one is overwhelming, the other fails to be representative.

The selection of blogs in the two networks mapped out in the spreadsheets has grown organically from the first few blogs, for instance, *Wood Turtle* and *You're Not Crazy*, which I arrived at through the methodology outlined above. The fact that both of them are converts may account for part of the overrepresentation of converts in the networks, though both have many non-convert readers. As a change from earlier stages of this research project, which included French and Swedish blogs, I have chosen to focus on English language blogs, which are primarily seemingly based in a North American offline context, according to the ways of determining this outlined above. However, these geographic limitations have not been enforced very strictly as it would give a skewed view of how the networks themselves operate.

Being part of a loose, informal network means that bloggers' writing often garners support, even when writing about otherwise contentious matters such as religious dress and how to wear it. An interest in textual analysis can be a shared topic of interest that makes these loose online networks different to secular blogs about fashion, can demonstrate how some of the bloggers, especially converts, not only use blogs as an arena for negotiating their new religious lives, without necessarily challenging religious hierarchy. Instead, creative, online use of religious text is part of an ongoing process of building a newly, or differently, religious identity. While intended readership is rarely explicit on the blogs, the texts below can include discussions of (male) religious authorities who might be perceived as obstructing women's religious practice (through exclusion from mosques, or about the challenges and expenses of converting to Orthodox Judaism), or Muslims or Jews from less conservative denominations who are often perceived as being prejudiced about religious dress and the roles of women in conservative religions. Comments show that readers of these blogs can include non-Muslims or non-Jews, as well as at other members of their religious communities, as well as with what is fashionable, or attractive (as secular understandings of fashionable dress is not an uncontested area) and available (often through online shopping).

#### **2.16 Mapping networks at different times**

I chose to map the networks at two stages. The first was at the end of 2012, when I was in the third year of my research. At this point, I chose to include several variables. Beyond web addresses, which I included mainly for my own reference, the categories I included (blog name, name of author(s), tagline, about, start/end date, blog roll and frequency of updating) were chosen because I thought they would give a sense of the similarities and differences, both within the networks and between them. This indeed proved to be the case, and was a helpful way of getting a sense of trends and differences between the Muslim and Jewish blogs, which is part of my original contribution to knowledge. The second mapping was something I did in mid-2016, preparing to submit the thesis after an extended interruption of studies. The latter mapping helped me get a sense of which blogs were still being updated. It also drew my attention to the main difference between blogs by Muslim and Jewish writers, namely their longevity or lack thereof. While none of the Jewish blogs I had mapped had been removed fully, several of the Muslim ones had been – whether this is because they were deliberately removed or because domain names expired is unclear. Some Jewish blogs had been set to private, but fewer than the combined total of Muslim blogs that had either been set to private or were no longer online.

Many of the individual blogs, however, are no longer being regularly updated – if they were, it was often with mentions of apologising to readers for no longer providing regular updates. Other blogs simply go quiet, with sporadic updates, sometimes as rarely as once a year, while some still have frequent posts. For some, such as *Sara at A Muslimah Writes*, they describe that their blogs have run their course. For others, such as *Jilbabble*, *Jamericanmuslimah*, *Conservadox and Single* or *Wood Turtle*, the slower pace of blogging is in part attributed to having had one or many young children in the past few years, leaving less spare time for blogging. *Bad for Shidduchim* (a blog in part about dating using a matchmaker, *shidduch*, in an Orthodox Jewish community) stopped updating her blog because she got married, which undermined the wider argument of her blog, while the bloggers who ran *Fromtherib* write that they have chosen to focus on other projects. Importantly, diversity of reasons for not updating blogs gives indication that these blogs are predominantly written in the writers' spare time, and perhaps, that their roles in people's lives change as their lives develop – as they settle in to different dress practices, as the political situation evolves, as new writers emerge. As *Nicole*, one of the Muslim bloggers, and *Sharon at Fashion-Isha*, one of the Jewish bloggers, have both written, blogging networks seem to wax and wane, with some central bloggers (such as the two of them), remaining, and new bloggers and networks constantly forming and reforming. Consequently, I have also chosen to include posts from blogs that I have discovered since the end of 2012. Whether or not these future networks will be hosted on blogging platforms rather than on social media is, however, a question for future research.

## **2.17 Blogs by Jewish writers**

### **2.17.1 What do all the acronyms mean?**

The Jewish bloggers are spread quite equally between three main identity categories which are clearly understood by the bloggers themselves, but which are less clear to outsiders: converts, BTs and FFBs. Converts, such as *Kochava at You're Not Crazy* or *Chaviva at Kvetching Editor*,<sup>50</sup> are born into a religion other than Judaism and adopt it later in life. BTs stands for *baalat teshuva*, plural *baalei teshuva*, meaning 'masters of return'. They are born Jewish but raised secular or atheist, and who 'return' to Orthodox Judaism: *Allison at Jew in the City* is an example, *baalteshuva* another. While some bloggers suggest that BTs and converts face some of the same challenges both on a personal and community level (in terms of acceptance), it seems from the blogs that this is not the case – the uncertainty of their role in the Jewish community is simply not present in the BT

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<sup>50</sup> What exactly to call *Chaviva's* blog has been a challenge: the web address is [www.kvetchingeditor.com](http://www.kvetchingeditor.com), and she uses both *Kvetching Editor* and *Chaviva* as ways to describe herself, which I do too. The formal title of her blog, however, is *Just call me Chaviva*.



blogs to the degree it is in blogs written by converts. FFBs (or ‘frum from birth’) are people who are born, raised and have been practicing as Orthodox Jews their whole lives.

In terms of commenting and reading each other’s blogs, however, these three groups interact online, but display slightly different emphases about where or how religious dress is important to them. For instance, for many of the FFB bloggers, dress and modesty rules are sometimes mentioned as part of the challenges of meeting a mate, and about their roles in the community, with more or less formal judgments passed on women who fail to comply. However, on some other FFB blogs, such as *Modest Clothing, frum* or observant fashion is celebrated as a playful and fun part of being an Orthodox Jewish woman. For converts and BTs, modest dress is more frequently contrasted with previous (secular) dress, closely interrogated and something which is important to get right. Interestingly, the only women who wear the *tallit*, the prayer shawl traditionally worn (by men) during morning-prayer and Yom Kippur self-define as BT (such as *Shira* who writes *On the Fringe*).

### **2.17.2 Anonymity – or not?**

Almost half of the Jewish blogs I study are anonymous, with the other half being run by women who not only identify themselves by name, but often also by their images. The anonymous blogs are overwhelmingly written by women who subscribe to very conservative interpretations of Judaism: they either self-define as conservadox or Hasidic. However, one of the bloggers, *Frida*, began blogging as a married Hasidic woman under her synonym, *Shpitzle Shtrimpkind*. It was only once she left the community and her husband that she began blogging under her real name, though she has left both blogs available online. I suggest, therefore, that the internet is a somewhat anonymous space for women writers from traditional communities. Given the insularity and small size of these communities offline, however, anonymity is hardly permanent and undisputed. For instance, while *Thinking Jew Girl* only identified herself by her pseudonym and her first name, some of her posters recognised her (based on her education history, for instance). She has also written about men she’s dated reading her blog and identifying themselves after failed dates, suggesting that relatively easy going approaches to anonymity mean that overlap between offline and online life is not enough. She has since set the blog to ‘Private’, and I therefore have removed direct quotes from her blog in the body of my thesis.

To remain genuinely anonymous, especially when writing about controversial or sensitive material, very stringent approaches might be necessary. Here, an example can be found in the privacy measures taken by *Nice Jewish Girl*, a slightly older (now 40-something) blogger who

writes about the challenges and sexual frustrations of remaining *frum* (religiously adherent) and *shomer negiah* (the rule which bans men and women from touching outside of marriage) as a single, adult woman. She writes that she won't answer emails, as they might indicate her IP address, which in turn might help people identify her. This is a further consideration for the concerns about the ethics of contacting bloggers that I discussed above. At the same time, the rule of thumb that sexually explicit blogs may well be creative projects needs to be borne in mind.

The other half (roughly) of the network write under their own names. Some appear to celebrate their minor fame within the online and offline communities associated with a wide readership, which in turn shows the value of more longitudinal research and a focus on the writers behind the blogs, rather than a synchronous snapshot of disembodied ideas. The most apparent example of this is *Allison*, the writer who started *Jew in the City*, a blog intended to dispel negative stereotypes about Orthodox Jews. Having undergone a redesign in 2012 to include more writers, *Jew In The City* functions as a part of *Allison's* career as a Jewish commentator in more mainstream media: the blog now includes links about how to approach her for public speaking engagements and related consultancy work. For other bloggers, professional and personal identification with their blogs offline is described as not without its challenges. For instance, Dominican convert and rabbi's wife *Aliza* of *Memoirs of a Jewminicana*, is a professional writer who has used her blog as a platform for other writing work, has a tag for donations of her website and a stringent Creative Commons warning against unattributed use of her writing. However, she also describes feeling uncomfortable about being recognised and approached offline by strangers who talk to her about her blogging. Nevertheless, she continues to blog about seemingly personal subjects, including her health, religious conversion and family background.

### **2.17.3 Taglines as a shorthand**

I originally included the taglines in my mapping because they help give an idea about what the blog is about and their tone, beyond the names of the blogs. Almost all of them mention the writer's Judaism, and many also include affiliation. More surprisingly, more than a third allude to or explicitly state the writer's marital status, while only one of the Muslim blogs I study mentions this in the tagline. This might be a reflection of the importance of marital status to the Jewish bloggers I study (an ongoing preoccupation in the blogs). This may also be because religiously conservative and observant readers of Muslim blogs assume that the writers are married, or because their strikes them as less relevant to how they present themselves online, or that signalling marital status is more

problematic, given the mainstream identification of Muslim women's religious dress and male oppression (see Chapter Three).

#### **2.17.4 Age groups and tech savvy**

The majority of the bloggers are relatively young (late teens to early 30s), which would seem to map closely on to computer literacy and ease among a younger generation. Some bloggers are older: *Cultural Hybrid* is a 'mother of teens', suggesting she might be at least in her mid-40s, as is *Hadassah* who writes *In the Pink*. Technological savvy is difficult to judge accurately based simply on reading blogs. However, a clue might be found in the blogging platforms used, layouts and uses of multimedia. Blogspot and Wordpress are the two main free blogging platforms, and the overwhelming majority of the blogs in the network are hosted on either of these two platforms.

Initially I started tracking this as I thought that Blogspot users would tend to be less tech savvy than Wordpress users, and that this would then give an indication of the technological prowess of the bloggers. Out of these, Blogspot, which is now owned and powered by Google, is slightly easier to use than Wordpress, but offers a slightly less sophisticated range of capabilities for monetising content, and the standard themes tend to look less 'professional'. Indeed, the majority of the Jewish blogs are done through Blogspot software, and many are text heavy, giving a diary-like feel to the blogs (as well as an indication of the sort of audience that is targeted: readers who have the patience and literacy levels required to read through long posts, while much online content is short, snappy and visual). However, some of the more 'professional' blogs, such as *Kvetching Editor*, are built on a Blogger platform but with highly customised themes, so the association between Wordpress and familiarity with software technology is far from a hard and fast rule.

#### **2.17.5 Geography**

As far as is discernible, most of the Jewish bloggers are currently based in the United States. Most of them appear to call the greater New York area home; unsurprising given that the area is known to have the highest concentration of Jews outside of Israel.<sup>51</sup> However, others are either unclear (such as *Feminist Freedom of Speech*), based in the Midwest, California (*Am I a Frum Feminist?*), and Denver, or moving around (Israel, Montreal). The geographic location of the writers does not appear to have any influence on how they interact online.

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<sup>51</sup> Cohen, Steven M., Ukeles, Jacob B. Miller, Ron (2012). 'Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011'. UJA Federation of New York. June. <http://www.ujafedny.org/jewish-community-study-of-new-york-2011/>. Retrieved 11 October, 2012.

### **2.17.6 Here today – not gone tomorrow**

The Jewish blogs are often ongoing, longterm projects; some have been running since 2004. The frequency of updating varies greatly; some update several times a week, while others may go months with only a few posts, suggesting that the blogs are predominantly done in the writers' spare time. By contrast, professional blogs have regular, and often automated, updating schedules, to ensure that regular readers know when to expect a new post and continue to return. Comments can help give an indication of how popular the blog is, though this does not obviously seem to reflect quality of writing (at least to an outsider): *Bad for Shidduchim*, which for an outsider reads as a relatively superficial account of life as a young Orthodox woman, regularly attracts more than 10 comments per post, while *Feminist Freedom of Speech* has much fewer commenters. Controversial subjects attract more comments, as seen by the activity on *Nice Jewish Girl* and *Shpitzle Strimkind*. Some of the blogs have a very high number of page views (as many as 1,300,000 for *Bad For Shidduchim*), while others have smaller but still significant readerships (ca. 14,000 for *Subjugated Wife*). However, as far from all blogs have hit meters, a comparison is difficult to make. Additionally, hits alone do not necessarily offer an accurate measure of reader engagement and influence.

### **2.17.7 Blogrolls and links**

The blogrolls show great variation between the different blogs, in terms of how many blogs each of the bloggers indicate that they read with some regularity. The bloggers who do have extensive blog rolls indicate that they read a range of blogs, or at least have accepted suggestions for links from other bloggers or those generated by the blogging platform. Most of these are dominated by other Jewish blogs, though they can include both male and female bloggers. These also indicate that many of the bloggers read or are at least aware of each other's work, even if they do not always post responses to each other's work. The blog rolls indicate the range of interests among the bloggers, so avowedly feminist bloggers often mention feminist blogs, fashion blogs have links to secular and religious fashion sites and cooking blogs are also popular (especially kosher ones). Some mention Muslim blogs as well, but these are in the minority. The importance of religious websites (such as [chabad.org](http://chabad.org)) or Jewish online media, such as [JWA.org](http://JWA.org) (Jewesses with Attitude) and [Tablet Mag](http://Tablet Mag), sometimes seen in the blog rolls. However, these may simply have been suggested by the blogging platforms, and not something that the bloggers regularly engage with, in light of the limited engagement with such forms of religious online authority discussed in Chapter Four.

## **2.18 Blogs by Muslim writers**

### **2.18.1 Anonymity and identifiers**

The Muslim blogs form a less geographically and culturally centred network than the Jewish blogs. Fewer of the bloggers are completely open about their identity (one third of the Muslim bloggers, compared to almost half of the Jewish bloggers), but there are more who are identified by their first names (or at least by ‘regular’ female names, as opposed to obvious pen names). Unlike the Jewish blogs, there is not a clear trend suggesting why or why not the bloggers are anonymous. There are some exceptions, where anonymity appears to be linked to events in the bloggers’ lives. For instance, one convert pseudonymous blogger wrote about having had a complicated and contentious relationship with her ex-husband and voiced concern about threats directed toward her, and later set her blog to ‘Private’. However, she described this as a recent development that had begun during the course of her blogging, and can therefore not be read as why she chose to be anonymous in the first place. (Of course, I have removed all mention of her in this thesis.) The women who blog under their full names are often women who write as a career, such as the writers at *Muslimah Media Watch*, or who are activists, such as *Safiyya*. Nevertheless, some of the most active blogs, such as *Wood Turtle*, are written under pseudonym, indicating that drawing conclusions about the nature of online anonymity is more complex in the Muslim network than in the Jewish network. A firm trend, though, is that the word ‘*Muslimah*’ (meaning ‘a Muslim woman’, in a variety of spellings) appears in as many as 12 of the blog titles. Thus, for almost half the bloggers, the primary identifying factors online are as both a Muslim and a woman. Strikingly, not a single tagline in this network mentions marital status, with only one explicitly mentioning the blogger’s children.

### **2.18.2 Converts and community**

Given the small percentage of converts to Islam described by statistics in Chapter One, a surprising number of the bloggers in the Muslim network are converts. While many of them are or have been married to Muslim men, there is frequently an insistence that their romantic relationship was not the primary driver for their conversion. Indeed, several of the bloggers have remained Muslim after relationships with Muslim men have foundered (such as *Jamericanmuslimah* who blogs at *Jamerican Muslimah’s Veranda*). Others, however, have ceased to be practicing Muslims following the changes in their marital status, as best demonstrated by the thoughtful but highly critical discussion of conservative Islam by (former) convert *Sober Second Look*. The association between dating and religious belonging is a sensitive topic, as it is in the Jewish blogs. Interestingly, the bloggers themselves tend to refer to themselves as ‘converts’ rather than ‘reverts’, despite the fact that the latter term would appear to be more closely aligned to the Islamic concept of *fitrah* (that all

people are born with an innate sense of God and of good and evil, meaning that taking the *shahada*, the declaration of belief, marks a return to God, rather than a conversion). I have therefore chosen to mimic this use of language of conversion rather than reversion throughout the thesis.

Similarly to the Jewish blogs, there is no division between the converts and bloggers who were raised as Muslims: they read and post comments on each other's blogs. However, the particular problems of converts (difficulties with acceptance in the community, gossip about adherence, etc.), are similar for Muslim and Jewish bloggers, though the Muslim bloggers voice less concerns about the future standing of their children within the community.

### **2.18.3 Geographical dispersion**

The Muslim network is more geographically dispersed than the Jewish one; some of the women are in Canada, one is in Europe, others have lived in the Middle East, many appear to be living outside of major city centres. This is in contrast to the results from the Pew Internet Research Center cited in Chapter One, which indicates that most American Muslims live in city centres. The majority describe themselves as American and all write in English, though Arabic phrases surface in all blogs, regardless of the women's stated ethnic identity. Splicing away writers outside of the geographic boundaries of the United States would not be reflective of the online reality.

### **2.18.4 Age, tech savvy and turnover**

The ages of the Muslim bloggers are difficult to determine, though many have young families or have recently left higher education. The Muslim network is more equally divided between Wordpress and Blogspot than the Jewish one. However, there is a similar range of quality of design, of use of multimedia and of length and frequency of blog posts. It is more common among these bloggers than among the Jewish ones to have multiple blogs.

The Muslim blogs tend to have a relatively short lifespan, something which is acknowledged on *Nicole's* blog, where she mentions that many blogs from when she began blogging have been discontinued or deleted, noticing that many of the same issues are resurfacing today. They also appear to have fewer hits, which is hardly surprising given the fragmentation and change within this network. They are, however, highly involved with each other, with often long blog rolls, frequent cross-posting and guest blogging.

### **2.18.5 Activism online**

A difference between the Jewish network and the Muslim network is the importance of blogs specifically targeted at moderating the image of religious women in the public domain. For instance, *Muslimah Media Watch*, is dedicated to monitoring the image of Muslim women in the

media. Another blog, run by a researcher called *Metis*, is dedicated to how Muslim feminists communicate online. While both the Muslim and Jewish networks contains engagement with the media and with (academic) feminism, the Muslim network shows a more formal approach to this: *Muslimah Media Watch* has a much stronger activist slant than a publication such as *Tablet Mag*, and Chabad's website is more focused on internal Jewish concerns than the relationships between the Muslim community at large and the secular world. Additionally, the Brass Crescent Awards, which rewards excellence in Muslim blogging, are much more formalised than anything I have discovered in the Jewish blogosphere. To some extent, the Muslim network map is therefore a map of mapping of blogs.

## **2.19 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have offered a discussion of the concerns that informed my methodology and data collection. As suggested by my analysis, the practices and ethics of doing research online are rapidly evolving. While this is an exciting element of doing research in an online space, it can also be a challenge for researchers, as the rapid changes in the online material are only matched by the diversity of opinions about how to approach the primary sources. Additionally, writing this chapter gave me an opportunity to offer a survey of the primary sources, giving an indication of the wider network of blogs that have formed the main bulk of my primary materials. In turn, this offers a background for the analysis of these sources that is the foundation of Chapters Three and Four.

### **3. Counter-narratives and enactment of online gendered religious identities through writing about religious dress**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will explore how Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women in a North American cultural context enact their differently religious and gendered online identities by blogging about religious dress. Rather than decreasing in importance, as suggested by many of the secularisation theorists discussed in Chapter One, the West has seen an ‘eruption’ of religion in the public sphere (Turner, 2011:x). Blogging about religious dress is not the *only* way in which Muslim and Orthodox Jewish women enact their online identities, but writing about such dress is prevalent beyond its obvious theological importance. In part, I argue, this stems from the challenges of being, in Tarlo’s phrase (2010), a ‘visibly Muslim’ woman. This can mean negotiating multiple forms of stigma and stereotyping about gender roles and religious practice. For instance, in a programme broadcast on National Public Radio in the USA, Noorain Khan, who wore a *hijab* from the age of 8 and chose to remove it at the age of 20, described that being visibly Muslim ‘felt like a public burden’.<sup>52</sup> The internet is a public but often informal space where bloggers can negotiate tensions about multiple aspects of religious dress – both as a marker of difference (from secular society and its assumed sexualisation of women) and of belonging (to a differently religious orthodoxy). These tensions might not be as widely debated in mainstream media and politics regarding religiously dressed Jewish women, but that does not mean they are untouched by them. The blogs show that Orthodox Jewish women also contend with a complex set of reactions and interactions about their religiously derived dress practices, both with secular society and their wider religious communities. While their dress is not necessarily easily identified as religiously derived by outsiders, it is distinctive to many partial insiders (Reform or secular Jews) and easily recognisable to other insiders (Orthodox Jews). The bloggers whose writing I study acknowledge that religious dress is often interpreted (both by the majority population and by members of their religious groups who do not agree that modest dress is a religious requirement) as an indication of the inferior roles accorded to women in minority

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<sup>52</sup>Khan, Noorain (2011). ‘Lifting the veil’. 00.43. *NPR*. 21 April 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/21/135413427/lifting-the-veil>. Retrieved October 13, 2015.



(often seemingly, or intentionally, insular) religious communities.<sup>53</sup> Women's blogging about the frequent inaccuracies of such interpretations show the limitations of regarding religious dress as a code, or language, which can readily be interpreted by outsiders or partial insiders. Rather than depending on dress to be indicative of their internal states, many bloggers show how it simultaneously conceals, reveals and helps constitute their religious identities – especially online.

Consequently, some blogging about religious dress can be read as counter-narratives to the pervasive idea that religiously dressed women are oppressed by male-dominated religious structures. These can be explicitly feminist or not-feminist, but inevitably emphasise the religious reasons behind modest dress. Explicit counter-narratives are often framed in terms of why someone wears *hijab* or covers her hair, and often include discussions of many sources of authority (as will be discussed in Chapter Four). Even when explicitly a counter-narrative, however, such blogs are often more complex and rounded than the term implies. For instance, *Sarah*, a Pakistani-Canadian writer who blogged at *A Muslimah Writes* describes her reasoning for blogging:

This blog was on faith and books in strange times: a mashup of reading, writing, and being Muslim in the digital age. Given how these things are undergoing radical transformations in today's world, I wanted to give a humanistic perspective on the Muslim readerly and writerly experiences.<sup>54</sup>

*Sarah's* blog included meditations of different aspects and challenges of wearing the *hijab* (which she wore for a decade, but stopped wearing during the course of blogging), on books, on her appreciation of Muslim feminism (even though she did not see herself in that category),<sup>55</sup> social media, being single and other aspects of her religious practice, such as praying during Ramadan. I contend that while blogging about religious dress for both Muslim and Jewish women can contain elements of counter-narrative, asserting the right to be differently religious and differently feminine, it is more accurately understood as being part of enacting a differently religious identity online.

Beyond religious dress being the 'public burden' alluded to in the introduction, in need of explanation and defence, blogging about religious dress can be read as the bloggers enacting, in an online public sphere, something which is part of their daily lives. Religious dress is something which they enjoy, or struggle with, or both, all of which give a full if sometimes seemingly contradictory picture of being a practising religious woman in North America. Religious dress is

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<sup>53</sup> 'Krista' (2012). 'Responding to the Latest Attempts to Save Muslim Women from their Clothing'. *Muslimah Media Watch*. 16 April. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2012/04/responding-to-the-latest-attempts-to-save-muslim-women-from-their-clothing/>. Retrieved 13 July, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> <https://amuslimahwrites.wordpress.com/about/>. Retrieved 4 July, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> <https://amuslimahwrites.wordpress.com/2012/01/03/on-my-lack-of-muslim-feminism/>. Retrieved 4 July, 2016.

closely associated with the feminisation of religion, and thus of the sanctification of women's everyday lives – both in conservative religious communities, and in the celebration of the subjective that is part of the online world. By combining these two lines of inquiry, both of counter-narratives and of the multiple ways bloggers enact being a religiously dressed woman online, I seek to achieve two goals. The first is in line with the early justification for this project, namely demonstrating that the internet offers us a more nuanced set of representations of the reasons behind and variations of women's religious dress than is readily available in mainstream media. While the increasing academic attention to women's religious dress and online presences is beginning to address this imbalance, ongoing political debates about the topic suggest that further research is needed, especially from a cross-religious perspective. This chapter is an expansion of such research, discussed at length in Chapter One. The second aim is to offer a new contribution to knowledge by drawing on Mol's (2002) work to argue that the vibrant enactments of gendered religious practices on the blogs suggest that these differently modern orthodox practices demonstrate an ethical and often subjective agency at work, without weakening religious belonging. Proliferations of media forms and online connectivity have created new avenues for mediating religion as it is lived, which nevertheless is not by necessity in opposition to more traditional religious structures – if anything, it calls into question the usefulness of such a binary.

### **3.2 Analytical framework**

On both the Jewish and Muslim blogs, there are frequent allusions to the media trope of religious women being 'oppressed', showing the bloggers to be in dialogue with their (mis)representation in mainstream media and, by extension, secular society. However, far from all blogging about religious dress need be interpreted as an activist reaction to mainstream narratives of women's subjugation by male-dominated religious structures, or the occasional apologist narrative that also surfaces. Adopting Mol's (2002) work as a consciously loose framework allows me to offer more nuance to my analysis of the primary sources than that afforded by a stark classification into narratives and counter-narratives. Over-emphasising the counter-narrative element of such blogging risks diminishing the diversity of opinions, practices and ongoing flux of the religious dress practices on the blogs, and risks over-dependence on a Foucauldian model of the shaping of individuals by powerful structures. Beyond suggestions by scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1999), that women subvert traditional, male dominated religious power structures, the deliberate use of religious dress as a marker of a minority religious identity in the West can be understood not as a subversion of the minority religion, such as Islam, but of the cultural values of mainstream culture. Much as Judith Butler's work gives language a primacy in her formation of the individual, and such

an individual is both fluid and dependent on the interaction with others, Annemarie Mol's *The Body Multiple* shows that such primacy of language is a useful tool for analysing how women enact their online identities through blogging about embodied religious practice, giving the written word continued importance online, even in the era of the 'selfie'. The repetition ties in to how there are often more than one post about clothing practices on the blogs I study, which in turn is a key component of Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which she uses to explain the way in which gender is constructed, arguing that it is, 'in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity, instituted through a stylised repetition of acts.' (Butler, 1997 in McCann and Kim, eds. 2013:462). While keeping the concept of enactment at the forefront of my analysis, I also draw on Nancy Ammerman's concept of 'lived religion' (2014) to argue that much of the writing about religious dress on the blogs I study is not only part of a 'form of religious interpretation that fosters women's voices and perspectives' (Lewis, 2013:44). While Lewis's interpretation strikes me as accurate, blogging about religious dress is also a 'material, embodied aspect[s] of religion as [they] occur in everyday life' (Ammerman 2014:190). The contemporary importance of women's religious dress, as demonstrated online, can also be understood in relation to the feminisation of religion and the sanctification of everyday life. I agree with Ammerman that both the importance of and messiness inherent in lived religion is unlikely to be a new phenomenon. The internet does not only allow a lower barrier to entry (than, for example, newspapers did) to document such experiences and concerns or for researchers seeking to access a wider range of such writing. I also suggest that the internet allows for new ways in which lived, messy religion can be enacted – without ceasing to be orthodox. The creativity enacted in religious dress, both in its physical representation and in the written online expressions, allows for a conception of female religious agency akin to Elizabeth Bucar's concept of 'creative conformity' (Bucar 2010). Beyond arguing that wearing religious dress is a part of lived religion, and that the online space is an area where women-led negotiations of religious interpretations can flourish, I therefore suggest that we can regard blogging about religious dress as a way in which differently modern religious identities are enacted.

### **3.3 Responding to the secular Other – multiple first person perspectives**

Using blogging as a way of explicitly challenging criticism about what religious dress indicates about gender roles in their communities is therefore part of how Muslim and Jewish women bloggers enact their online identities. Common themes in such posts include discussions of the limits of contemporary secular feminism and society, personal agency over religious dress (demonstrating how their dress practices are related to wider feminist debates), and through offering

personal and often humorous rebuttals to what they argue are misunderstandings (and resulting stereotypes) about their religious practice. Bloggers from nominally isolated or traditional religious communities thus demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the criticisms levelled at their dress practices and associated gender roles. In both the Jewish and Muslim blogosphere repeated emphasis on counter-narratives tend to be found on blogs that deliberately serve that specific purpose. While they remain based in first person perspectives, these are often blogs that aggregate more than one person's writing. Examples of such blogs include *AltMuslimah*, the more recent *The Hijab Project*, or *Jew in the City*. Founded in 2009 on the principle of creating an online space where Muslims between the ages of 18-45 could write about their concerns about gender and Islam, *AltMuslimah* is now (2016) a resource and platform for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to discuss those matters. Similarly, *Jew in the City* was started in 2007, and has since grown to a team of twelve people who publish frequently about many aspects of Orthodox Jewish life, as well as offering consultancy services, short films and social media content. The longevity of and activity on such blogs indicates that the need to address the representations about religious women as oppressed remains. Such blogs can, but do not necessarily, promote a consistent set of arguments. Instead, the strength of aggregation blogs usually stems from the diversity of voices and perspectives about different aspects of being a woman practicing a minority religion in the West.

Thus, I agree with Saad (2015) that the aggregation blog *AltMuslimah*, which was one of the first ones consulted in this research, contains blogs posts that act as counter-narratives. In contrast to her results, however, I have not found this to be an exhaustive category for analysing writing about religious dress in the blogging networks I have studied. While *AltMuslimah* deliberately includes both feminist and non-feminist perspectives on women and gender in Islam, posts on the blog tend to be more nuanced in their approach to religious dress than *Jew in the City*,<sup>56</sup> and generally more likely to challenge the prevailing state of Islam in North America than *Jew in the City* is of Orthodox Judaism. A highly active online resource, *AltMuslimah* has increasingly become the focus of scholarly attention, beyond Saad (2015), Lewis (2015) and co-written by founder Asma Uddin (2016), while *Jew in the City* has not been similarly studied. Reading *AltMuslimah* informed the early stages of my research and posts by individual writers on *AltMuslimah* showed the emphasis on engaging with the question of agency, both personal and expressed through conforming to religious rules, that I later found to be a recurring theme of counter-narratives.

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<sup>56</sup> This is a deliberate editorial policy and reflection of the values of founder Asma Uddin: Hodgetts, Colleen (2011). 'Interview with Asma Uddin, Founder of AltMuslimah'. *Gender Across Borders*. 5 September. <http://www.genderacrossborders.com/2011/09/05/interview-with-asma-uddin-founder-of-altmuslimah/>. Retrieved 10 June, 2016.

However, reading posts in the rest of the blogging network I have studied showed that while individualistic agency would often be emphasised by the writers, it was not necessarily the only set of concerns that informed religious dress – even in counter-narratives. For instance, in a long blog post on *AltMuslimah*, entitled *Inside the head that wears the crown*, *Rabea* blogs about her varying considerations about wearing the *hijab* as a Muslim woman in the United States. She describes women's removing their *hijabs* as an expression of low self-esteem, a 'surrender' to pressures from the mainstream who see her as a terrorist, or the rest of her (less visibly Muslim) community who view her as particularly virtuous and likely socially awkward. The latter is an occasional theme on the blogs regarding the role of religiously dressed women, while the perceived link between religious dress and self-esteem is more common.

Acknowledging that the 'idea that a woman's spirituality is a function of how many yards of fabric she wears is an interesting concept, and one that does not sit well with mainstream society', despite the fact that other women, including Catholic nuns and Orthodox Jewish women cover their hair, is part of how *Rabea* acknowledges that her religious practice might seem outlandish to secular outsiders. Seemingly inconsistently, she also argues that the 'yards of fabric' are a physical manifestation of the religious agency at work when an American woman puts on a *hijab*: 'Well, for an American Muslim woman who covers her hair as a personal choice, to some extent she wears her spiritual heart on her head.' At the time of writing, *Rabea* reacts to the conflicting messages about her religious dress from her varying social contexts,

In the end, an American Muslim woman in a scarf really has only one place to go for solace, for strength, and for peace – back to God. The society that she lives in writes her off as complaisant to her own oppression and the community that she belongs to insists that her worth lies not in the personality that the scarf contains but in the scarf itself. In either arena she is reduced and the headscarf is misappropriated and misunderstood. As much as a Muslim woman's headscarf is no one's business but her own, the headscarf has become everyone's business and is on everyone's mind.<sup>57</sup>

Part of *Rabea*'s emphasis on agency and choice is a negotiation with the secular language of the 'liberation' of women. It is also, of course, a reaction to the trope that Muslim women are 'oppressed'. She argues that wearing the *hijab* should hinge on Muslim women's own choices:

Let us be the ones who decide what is beautiful, what is free, what is oppressed, and what is spiritual. If you feel liberated in a scarf, keep it on. If you think your religiosity is impeded by an insistence on a wardrobe choice, move beyond the exterior of it all.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/2956>. Retrieved 4 November, 2011. Last accessed 28 September, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/2956>. Retrieved 4 November, 2011. Last accessed 28 September, 2016.

However, such liberation is not achieved through secular means, but through a continued renegotiation with Muslim beliefs and practices. Wearing the *hijab* consciously matters, according to *Rabea*, beyond the concerns of secular feminists.

In part, wearing a *hijab* is an extension of prayer, as *Rabea* describes that a Muslim woman, ‘bows her covered head in prayer five times a day in submission to God, and chooses to prolong these moments of prayer by keeping her head covered throughout the day.’ Beyond becoming what Mauss (2006) would call an unconscious technique of the body throughout the day, religious dress is here part of enacting religion or of religious personhood. Consequently, the *hijab* is a reminder of the relationship between a Muslim woman like *Rabea* and God, and a physical manifestation of those beliefs, both to God and to other people, a ‘wonderful choice’, something which can be ‘beautiful’ but which also can come with all sorts of conflicting social pressures. *Rabea* does not mention how thus enacting being a religiously dressed woman online fits within the rest of her practice. However, her writing about the topic in a public place, offering a view ‘inside the head’ suggests that she wishes to give an account to those who either disagree with her about religious dress, or who place excessive emphasis on the symbolism of piety rather than the part it plays in a person’s religious practice. Beyond the counter-narrative element, wearing the *hijab* can therefore be understood in the context of an ethically driven agency which takes into account the wider social responses to her embodied practice but is not exclusively determined by them, a matter between a woman and God – enacted online.

### **3.3.1 World Hijab Day and a variety of enactments**

Adopting an inclusive, first person, perspective while explaining the reasons behind religious dress is one of the ways in which the bloggers make their counter-narratives relatable, simultaneously allowing them to engage with co-religionists, readers from other religious traditions and non-religious readers. However, one of the limitations of exclusively approaching women’s blogging about religious dress as counter-narratives is the diversity of views. Such diversity is reflected in the many responses to activist interventions in many of the blogs I study about World Hijab Day.<sup>59</sup> World Hijab Day is an activist intervention begun in New York in 2013, whereby women of all religious persuasions are encouraged to ‘experiment’ with wearing the *hijab* on February 1<sup>st</sup> as an exercise in solidarity and religious tolerance. While this is appreciated by some members of the Muslim blogging network I study, and the blogosphere more generally, and where some encourage

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<sup>59</sup> <http://worldhijabday.com/>. Retrieved September 1, 2016.

women to try wearing the *hijab* as part of exploring prejudice,<sup>60</sup> others<sup>61</sup> describe it as ‘extremely offensive’.<sup>62</sup> Challenging World Hijab Day stems from many concerns, including ones about cultural appropriation and fetishisation,<sup>63</sup> as well as suspicions that a part of religious practice is becoming nothing more than a fashion statement.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, some bloggers, such as *Amara* at *The Hijab Project*, might not only embrace but expand the concept of World Hijab Day. *Amara* uses her blog to call for other women to experiment with wearing the *hijab* and blogging about these experiences. Rather than depending exclusively on her own experiences and writing as a foundation for building a ‘bridge of understanding’, *Amara* encourages readers to share or even generate their own offline experiences, to create an online resource:

As a Muslim living in America, the gaping gap of ignorance exists between myself and others: my headscarf, otherwise known as the hijab. I pleat, fold, and fasten a piece of cloth over my head everyday before I go out, but the hijab means more to me than merely concealing my hair. In the religion of Islam, both Muslim men and women are expected to preserve their modesty, and from an Islamic point of view, the hijab contributes to the creation of a modest atmosphere. In an era where women are universally sexualized, Muslim women believe that the hijab can prevent this from happening. The Hijab Project is a social experiment that I’d like girls—both Muslim and non-Muslim—to begin. Try on your own headscarf to school, the mall or other public place, and observe the reactions that people give you. Are you looked at differently? Do people treat you differently? Then, share your experience here! If you currently wear a hijab, tell us your hijab story. A bridge of understanding needs to be built between Muslims and non-Muslims, and experiencing the lifestyle of a growing and often misunderstood culture in America is vital to shedding the lack of knowledge that many people have regarding Islam as a religion. I’m looking forward to hearing your hijab stories! --السلام عليكم--[May peace be upon you]<sup>65</sup>

*Amara* writes about asking other women to wear and then blog about wearing the hijab as a way of bridging what she sees as the gap in understanding between American Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam in general and the hijab in particular. *Amara*’s approach is in contrast to how bloggers such as *Orbala*, who is highly critical of World Hijab Day, responds to the practice of non-Muslim women wearing the hijab to promote understanding. *Orbala* writes that, while she respects *hijabis*

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<sup>60</sup> <https://islamwich.com/2015/03/27/exploring-prejudice/>. Retrieved 13 May, 2016

<sup>61</sup> For instance, the women cited in this article: Mendoza, Jessica (2015). ‘Why are Non-Muslim Women Wearing the Hijab?’ *The Christian Science Monitor*. 17 December. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/1217/Why-are-non-Muslim-women-wearing-the-hijab>. Retrieved 18 March, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> <http://angry-hijabi.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/can-non-muslims-wear-hijab-other-faqs.html>, Retrieved 18 March, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> <http://angry-hijabi.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/fetishization>. Retrieved 18 March, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Kane, Clare (2016). ‘Are Hijabs becoming...A Fashion Statement?’ *Style.Mic – The Economist*. 5 February. <https://mic.com/articles/134432/why-hijabs-becoming-a-fashion-statement-for-non-muslim-women>. Retrieved 1 March, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.thehijabproject.org/>. Retrieved August 12, 2016.



and herself wears the *hijab* ‘whenever I feel like it’, and while she recognises a need for wider interrogation of Islamophobia, World Hijab Day ‘isn’t helping with anything’. Beyond citing blog posts from both *AltMuslimah* and *Patheos* about World Hijab Day, she argues that World Hijab Day includes too narrow a definition of what *hijab* is or looks like, that it too closely ties Muslim women to their dress, and that it is not an effective way of dispelling stereotypes.<sup>66</sup>

One of the tensions that surface in *Orbala*’s comments about the challenge for both bloggers and academics writing about religious dress is one that I too have struggled with: namely that the ongoing emphasis on religious dress as a marker of identity obscures other issues facing Muslim women in North America. An over-identification with dress could also be a concern for writing about Orthodox Jewish women. While conscious that continuing to write about dress might perpetuate stereotyping through obscuring other concerns, both religious and otherwise, that these women express, I chose to retain religious dress as the focus of my research, albeit acknowledging to be one subject among others that they write about.

However, it appears that constructing an online identity as a modestly dressed religious woman (both Jewish and Muslim) currently often includes having an opinion about mainstream representation, which associates religious dress with oppression, or occasionally, about religious apologists who offer a similarly un-nuanced picture. As suggested in the analysis of the primary sources in Chapter Two, many of the bloggers use a sort of ‘strategic essentialism’ when describing themselves, based on their religious belonging, marital status or religious dress. Many of the blogs, even when not exclusively about religious dress, include repeated mentions about religious dress. Much like religious dress itself, blogging about dress gains power from repetition. This is true even in its negation, such as arguing that religious dress and gender roles are not the main concerns for them. Therefore, analysing blogging about religious dress still strikes me as a worthwhile intellectual pursuit, even as I acknowledge such concerns – especially when part of a comparison of how women of different religions use dress as part of enacting gendered religious identities online.

### **3.3.2 Counter-narratives and enactment on Jewish blogs**

A desire to dispel prejudice and stereotyping about Orthodox Jews, including the roles of women in the community, underpins some of the Jewish blogs as well. Early posts on *Jew in the City* were predominantly attributed to *Allison* (the founder) herself. While the blog has since grown to become more of an aggregation of different people’s posts, it remains heavily influenced by *Allison*’s online

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<sup>66</sup> <https://orbala.wordpress.com/2015/01/22/the-problem-with-world-hijab-day/>. Retrieved August 12, 2016.



persona. The explicit aim of the blog is to combat stereotyping in both a wider religious community (non-Orthodox Jews) and the rest of society (non-Jews), who the bloggers claim perpetuate negative stereotypes about Orthodox Judaism:

Unfortunately, most non-Orthodox Jews and non-Jews have a very negative perception of Orthodox Jews and Judaism. When they think of Orthodoxy, words like backwards, repressed, outdated, sexist, and anti-scientific often come to mind. Scandals that reinforce these misconceptions hit the papers all too often.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, supporting my earlier suggestion that blogs which aggregate multiple writers' opinions are more likely to be more consistent in providing a counter-narrative, *Jew in the City* is one of the few Jewish blogs in the network I study where this is done consistently. Hence, the blog has an explicit counter-narrative intent.

As I will discuss below, especially in Chapter Four, enacting one's religious identity through wearing and blogging about religious dress does not have to entail the wholesale acceptance of the behaviours and beliefs of everyone in one's religious community. However, as mentioned above, unlike many of the writers on *AltMuslimah*, *Allison* shows limited interest in critiquing the current state of Orthodox Judaism.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, her reference to 'scandals' being over-represented in the media suggests that she considers the various Orthodox communities are unfairly portrayed, rather than in need of reform. *Jew in the City* reads as a woman-run heir to the J-blogsphere, a male-dominated, earlier phenomenon, which centred on theological debate but which has since largely run its course.<sup>69</sup> Much like *Jew in the City*, the J-blogsphere tended to be conservative in its leanings.<sup>70</sup> *Allison* has been accused of being an apologist, especially regarding sexism in the Orthodox community,<sup>71</sup> to which she replies that she is basing her blogging about Orthodox Judaism on her own experiences. She enacts her identity online through blogging about different aspects of being a religious woman, ranging from being fashionable, to how it makes her feel, to the religious framework that upholds it. Repeatedly representing her views as reflections of her own lived

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<sup>67</sup> From [jewinthecity.com/about](http://jewinthecity.com/about). Retrieved September 25, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Such critics do or did exist. One critical site, <http://failedmessiah.typepad.com/>, was, however, bought earlier this year by an anonymous buyer, and has not published anything since. However, emulators such as <https://lostmessiahdotcom.wordpress.com/> are continuing the work of uncovering abuses within the Jewish community, as discussed in Nathan-Kazis, Josh (2016). 'Successors to Anti-Orthodox "Failed Messiah" Site Humbly Take Up Muckraker's Mantle'. *Forward*. 21 April. <http://forward.com/news/national/339144/successors-to-anti-orthodox-failed-messiah-site-humbly-take-up-muckrakers/>. All retrieved 1 September, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> <http://dovbear.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/the-end-of-j-blogsphere.html>, Retrieved 9 July 2016.

<sup>70</sup> <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2009/06/on-divisions-in-the-jblogsphere-and-president-obamas-cairo-speech.html>. Retrieved 9 July 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Jewcy Staff (2009). 'Mayim Bialik Questions about Orthodox Sexism'. *Jewcy*. 15 July. Comment from 'Recruiting\_Animal' <http://jewcy.com/jewish-religion-and-beliefs/mayim-bialik-has-questions-about-orthodox-sexism>. Retrieved 19 June, 2016.

experience defuses potential criticism against her, as criticisms can be deflected by not aligning with the area where she is the expert – namely, her own lived experience.

As will be further discussed in Chapter Four, much like other Muslim and Jewish bloggers included in my research, *Allison* is careful to emphasise that she is not a religious expert in a conventional sense. However, while one of the ways in which *Allison* enacts her religiously dressed online identity is based in her own experience rather than that of an ‘expert’, she also responds to questions (nominally sent in by readers, although the provenance of such questions both here and in other blogs can often be challenged) about concerns about the roles of women in Orthodox Judaism. Offline, giving such advice would probably fall to a more traditional religious figure. Several such questions are about religious dress. Even though Orthodox Jewish women are not as visibly different to the mainstream (both secular and from the majority of Jews who do not self-define as Orthodox) as Muslim women who wear the *hijab* are, their dress is distinctive and apparent to partial insiders, including Reform Jews. Questions include why Orthodox women do not wear trousers,<sup>72</sup> why they cover their hair with wigs rather than scarves,<sup>73</sup> why Orthodox men do not wear wigs<sup>74</sup> and (controversially) how Orthodox Jews can afford to be well-dressed if they are on welfare.<sup>75</sup> The last post is not written by *Allison* herself, but by a rabbi. Having a rabbi as one of her writers on her blogs not only indicates that *Allison* has increased the number of writers on her blog, but also illustrates her dependence on more conventional forms of religious authority than those commonly represented on the blogs I study.

While offering counter-narratives against misunderstandings about Orthodox Jews, *Jew in the City* often frames such narratives as more-or-less subtle critiques of secular ways of dressing and, by extension, of life. Herself a BT, a halakhically Jewish woman who has ‘returned’ to Orthodox practice following a largely secular upbringing, *Allison* describes her religious dress practices from the perspective of someone who has personal experience of both a secular and Orthodox way of life, and who found the former lacking. After a brief discussion of the religious reasons for why Orthodox Jewish women tend not to wear trousers, *Allison* offers examples of when she changed from wearing what might be called secular dress, to being religiously dressed:

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.jewinthecity.com/2009/06/why-dont-orthodox-jewish-women-wear-pants/>. Retrieved 26 January, 2012

<sup>73</sup> <http://jewinthecity.com/2009/07/isnt-wearing-a-wig-over-hair-kind-of-pointless/>. Retrieved 19 June, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> <http://jewinthecity.com/2007/11/why-orthodox-men-dont-wear-wigs/>. Retrieved 19 June, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> <http://jewinthecity.com/2013/10/why-are-there-orthodox-jews-dressed-to-the-nines-on-welfare/>. Retrieved 19 June, 2016.

Now on to my personal story: I started wearing only skirts as an experiment right before I got to college. I wasn't convinced that they were mandatory by all opinions, but I did want to associate myself with other observant Jews (and I didn't find super-baggy pants particularly appealing), so I gave skirt-wearing a go. I realized, after a while, that wearing skirts in public (I did and still do wear pants in front of other women and family members in private) was a good personal reminder about who I was, what I believed in, and what I wanted to represent to the rest of the world.<sup>76</sup>

By reminding the reader of her earlier thoughts about skirt-wearing (that she 'wasn't convinced they were mandatory'), *Allison* shows that beginning to wear religious dress was a considered choice rather than something foisted on her, and positions the change in dress as an indication and expression of her changed religious convictions. Her personal narrative is thus also a counter-narrative that gently undermines possible suggestions that she is 'oppressed'. Once the choice has been made, her dress acts a 'good personal' reminder to herself and to others, as she enacts her newly observant identity. Openly in support of Orthodox women wearing skirts and dresses rather than trousers, *Allison* does not voice any doubts about her choices. The doubts she had were in the past, and have been assuaged by her embodied practice.

Conforming to such religious dress practices is not only for herself and for God, but also something which *Allison*, in an online sphere, portrays as being done for others, assuming that they are not women or members of her own family. *Allison* cites demonstrating belonging to her religious community through her dress as one of the reasons for her dress choices. By enacting religious belonging through dress, her belonging is made visible, which seems to reinforce *Allison's* religious identity. It ties her to her community and is a physical, repeated reminder of what she believes in:

It was actually a non-Jewish dorm neighbor in college, though, that made me realize how nice it was to associate myself with my community in an outward way. It was towards the beginning of my freshman year, and this neighbor shared an interesting story with me and a fellow Orthodox friend. He said that when he first got to campus, he was eager to make friends, so in an attempt to find like-minded people, he put on (and kept wearing) a t-shirt with his favorite band on it. He struck up a conversation with a classmate along the way based on the shirt, but the conversation didn't end up leading to a friendship since he and the classmate didn't have much more in common than the band. And then he said to us, "You people, with your yarmulkes and skirts, you can find each other so easily and automatically know that you've got so much in common. You're so lucky to be a part of a community like that."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.jewinthecity.com/2009/06/why-dont-orthodox-jewish-women-wear-pants/>. Retrieved 26 January 26, 2012.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.jewinthecity.com/2009/06/why-dont-orthodox-jewish-women-wear-pants/>. Retrieved 26 January 26, 2012.

*Allison's* visible association with 'other observant Jews' is not only something she likes, but something which she actively wants to show the world. She portrays the belonging and her use of dress as part of delineating group boundaries as something envied by secular and non-Orthodox people. *Allison* thus suggests that their identity markers are much more superficial, making a rapid building of community and belonging difficult; the rootless post-moderns, perhaps, as mentioned in my brief discussion of Baudrillard in Chapter One. Here, therefore, the counter-narrative that *Allison* offers is not against a secular world that misunderstands her practices. Rather, at least one – her old neighbour – understands. He is described as recognising the benefits of belonging that *Allison* enjoys. Instead, the counter narrative she is enacting is poised against an individualistic secularism. These themes, of belonging and creatively conforming in part through religious dress, are emphasised by being enacted online. They also help shape the community *Allison* builds online, thanks to the mutually reinforcing bent of the commenters on her blog.

### **3.4 Sharing concerns in a hybrid online space**

The online space offers an arena for discussions and facilitation of both the hybridity of the offline and the online world, and might therefore, as mentioned in Chapter One, be considered a 'third space'. Muslim and Jewish women not only face similar challenges and online social influences, but also more directly interact with each other online based on understandings of the similarities of the ways in which their religion and dress choices influence their lives. On Jewish blogs, writers might describe that their *sheitels* or *teichels* had the elegance they see in *hijabs*.

For example, something she describes as 'hijab envy' can be found in a lengthy post by *Chaviva* at *Kvetching Editor*. She describes seeing two Muslim girls,

Two Muslim girls walked past me in the most beautiful hijabcoverings I've ever seen. I started thinking: These women look so beautiful in their head coverings that wrap over and around and here I am, wearing a headscarf that I'm perpetually shifting and pulling and tucking and I don't feel beautiful in it.<sup>78</sup>

She fears being seen as a 'closet Muslim', though notes that 'Muslim style' head coverings have been worn in the past by Jewish women living in Muslim dominated countries. Nevertheless, her desire for the beauty she sees in Muslim clothing remains,

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<sup>78</sup> <http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/2011/04/tale-of-magic-tichel-and-its-hijab-envy.html#.TyJElsWmjA>, Retrieved 27 January, 2012.

But sometimes, I troll the sites that sell these beautiful scarves and am jealous. Envious. I sometimes covet the beauty that these women accomplish in their clothing and hair coverings.<sup>79</sup>

This attraction to religious dress from other religious communities that adhere to similar modesty rules is beginning to be increasingly studied, which is why I will give it limited recourse here. However, it points to a few relevant findings. The first is that Muslim and Jewish women have more similar concerns than differences when it comes to the ways in which they dress their bodies. The aesthetics, while not exactly the same, are surprisingly similar, as discussed on more mainstream online magazines such as Tablet Mag.<sup>80</sup>

The comparisons between Jewish and Muslim women's clothing is not limited to the fashionable elements, however, but also incorporates the variations in religious backgrounds to the slightly different rules governing modesty restrictions. *Allieliv* on who blogged at *Tales of a Modern Hijabi*<sup>81</sup> states that she became interested in both Christian and Jewish modesty laws after discovering the similarities with her own beliefs as a committed *hijabi*, 'I was surprised at the similarities in head covering between the three religions!'<sup>82</sup> As a result, she writes two posts about Jewish and Christian head coverings, highlighting the religious backgrounds. A convert to Islam who began wearing the hijab before she recited the *Shahadah*, *Allieliv's* blog shows an emphasis on tips for new Muslims, including both a range of religious texts (both from the Quran and the *Hadith* literature), links to websites associated formal religious structures and a tab of 'Islamic' greetings for different occasions, both in Arabic and transcribed. As will be discussed at more length in Chapter Four, such a heavy dependence on traditional forms of religious authority is surprisingly unusual in the blogging networks I study. However, her post on Jewish head coverings includes a link to the shopping site *Cover Your Hair*,<sup>83</sup> showing that there are multiple interactions between Muslim and Jewish women when it comes to religious dress online. Even in the context of enacting an online religious identity that is very closely aligned to conventional forms of religious authority, these can also contain an element of consumerism and hybridity.

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<sup>79</sup> <http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/2011/04/tale-of-magic-tichel-and-its-hijab-envy.html#.TyJElsWmjpa>, Retrieved 27 January, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Shukert, Rachel (2016). 'Dolce & Gabbana Launches Hijab and Abaya Collection'. *Tablet Mag*. 8 January. <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/196492/dolce-gabbana-launch-hijab-and-abaya-collection>. Retrieved 12 May, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> <http://allieliv.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/headcovering-in-judaism/>. Retrieved 27 January, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> <http://allieliv.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/headcovering-in-judaism/>. Retrieved 27 January, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.coveryourhair.com/>. Retrieved 28 September, 2016.

Further examples of how the online space can allow for both hybridity and enactment of conservative religious identities can be found on the blog *Cultural Hybrid Confessions*, where the name of the blog itself signals that the blogger's cultural identity is not static. Written by a Hasidic academic and the mother of teens, she describes combining her many different personas and concerns on her blog, as well as the many different cultural influences on her identity. Rather than providing a single-stranded counter-narrative, hybridity is something she identifies as an aspect of life in twenty-first century multicultural New York, 'the inescapable reality of life in the 21st century, which is that most of us come into direct contact with cultural difference almost on a daily basis.'<sup>84</sup> Encouraging such dialogue, a guest post by *hijab*-wearing *Saada* on *Culturally Hybrid Confessions*, described as 'a feisty, intelligent woman, currently lives and works in New York City' (and who is elsewhere described as being Libyan), recounts her experiences of prejudice and micro-aggressions that she has faced living in the United States as a religiously dressed woman. These range from 'eyebrow-raised and eyebrow-crossed looks' to the suggestion that she has been forced to wear the *hijab* by her family (inaccurate, as her family were initially unhappy about her wearing the *hijab*), or to students leaving her class because they do not want to be taught by a woman in *hijab*. *Saada* also argues that once people know her learn that she is a 'human being just like them', and especially that she wears the *hijab* out of her own free will, that they overcome their prejudices.

Indicating how the online space can be used for negotiating a variation of aspects of religious dress, *Saada's* post about being a religiously dressed Muslims post is not only posted on a blog run by a Hasidic woman, but the comments that *Saada* receives in support are also from women who are Jewish. For instance, *Rivki*, who blogs at *Life in the Married Lane*,<sup>85</sup> shares her own experiences of micro-aggressions and stereotyping based on her clothing, suggesting a shared sets of concerns with *Saada* about being a religiously dressed woman in the public sphere. Both of the incidents *Rivki* cites are associated with her femininity and role as a religiously dressed mother:

The first, from a cashier in Memphis, was ridiculous. She said to me, "Since I started working here, now I understand why Jews are so rich. Your food is so expensive!" Um... okay. The second, from a cashier in Cleveland, the day before Rosh HaShanah. I was

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<sup>84</sup><http://culturalhybridconfessions.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/coming-next-a-guest-post-confessions-of-a-muslim-woman-in-nyc/>. Retrieved 19 August, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> <https://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/>. Retrieved 13 August, 2016.



wearing all black, a scarf on my head, was pregnant and had my toddler with me. I felt like a walking stereotype, and then she asked me if I was making brisket. I was. She had a look on her face that I couldn't quite place, smugness, or something. It didn't make me feel warm and fuzzy. It made me feel pigeonholed (for the record, it was actually the \*first\* time I had ever made brisket).<sup>86</sup>

Having shared these comments, which appear to have been more in keeping with the comments by *Cultural Hybrid Confessions* herself about experiencing micro-aggressions from the secular or at least not-Jewish mainstream, *Rivki* directly addresses *Saada*, writing that:

To Saada, whenever I'm out and see a Muslimah with a head-covering, I feel a sort of solidarity. I think to myself, "hey, I'm covering my hair, too! We're hair-covering buddies!" I usually try to be friendly and smile. Really, I think our cultures are more alike than different, and any woman who is strong enough to look visibly different for her religious principles gets mad props in my book.<sup>87</sup>

Acknowledging such similarity of experiences of being visibly differently dressed appears, in *Rivki's* example, to be easier online than offline. While she writes a lengthy comment online, offline she describes herself as 'trying to be friendly and smile' – a much less direct engagement. Of course, there can be several reasons for this, including the consideration that someone might not want to be bothered by speaking about religious dress with a stranger, shyness or the fact that communicating via blogs is asynchronous and can be done at the different writers' convenience.

However, while such comments are welcomed in the comment section of the blog, there is also an assertion about the scale of the challenges faced by religiously dressed women in the public sphere. While the *Hasidic Hybrid* responds very positively to *Rivki's* comment, *Saada's* response is more measured, as she answers:

Thanks for your comments. I also feel a sense a solidarity when I see a woman in religious attire, but at the same time I keep wondering what a pity it is that we have let the "media" and the world manipulate our solidarity.<sup>88</sup>

As suggested above, the media is frequently seen by many of these women as a monolith which does not accurately reflect their realities or their needs. While they might not be explicitly composing counter-narratives, the perniciousness of inaccurate representation is never far away.

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<sup>86</sup> <http://culturalhybridconfessions.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/coming-next-a-guest-post-confessions-of-a-muslim-woman-in-nyc/>. Retrieved 19 August, 2012.

<sup>87</sup> <http://culturalhybridconfessions.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/coming-next-a-guest-post-confessions-of-a-muslim-woman-in-nyc/>. Retrieved 19 August, 2012.

<sup>88</sup> <http://culturalhybridconfessions.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/coming-next-a-guest-post-confessions-of-a-muslim-woman-in-nyc/>. Retrieved 19 August, 2012.

### 3.5 Not necessarily isolated

Countering, subverting, playing with narratives and stereotyping about women who are religiously dressed also forms part of how Muslim and Jewish women enact their first person online identities. Much as *Allison at Jew in the City* does in the example above, the bloggers sometimes position their religious dress practices as a means of overcoming the perceived short-comings of secular society (such as the sexualisation of women). In an example cited above, *Amara* who runs *The Hijab Project*, touches on what she regards as the beneficial elements of wearing a *hijab*, namely offering a counter-balance to the contemporary sexualisation of women, which will be replaced by ‘a modest atmosphere’. However, some of the more interesting enactments of religiously dressed online identity stem from the unabashedly subjective perspectives about dress and gender on blogs that are primarily written from a single point of view. Such blogs consistently show that the bloggers are better informed about the secular world than the secular world is about their communities. Actively engaging with an online community, there are also frequent responses to commenters about matters that they may have understood or misunderstood about gender roles or about religious dress. Such engagement in turn subverts stereotypes about conservative religious communities being completely closed off from the rest of society. It also sits in tension with the fact that some religious communities (including certain Hasidic ones), pride themselves on limiting the pernicious influences of the online world. These contradictions are not necessarily explicitly discussed in the blogs, but are instead often addressed obliquely, where first person experiences that appear to counter pervasive negative stereotyping are used as a way of enacting feminine online religious identities.

One Hasidic blogger, *RFiedler* who blogged<sup>89</sup> at *Hasidism and Literature*,<sup>90</sup> draws on the difference between religious law as it is written and religious practice as it is lived when challenging the misrepresentation of women in Hasidic communities. She uses this distinction as the basis for her arguments about why she finds representations of Hasidism so inaccurate, instead of arguing that problems within such communities are over-reported by the media (as *Jew in the City* does). She does not, however, exclusively challenge narratives from the secular world about Hasidic Jewish women. Instead, her blog modifies representations of life in the community that religious leaders might wish to perpetuate, in turn picked up and transformed by a mainstream media keen for a juicy story. However, and importantly, she both emphasises the importance of lived religion and mentions such misrepresentation by religious leaders, without any indication that

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<sup>89</sup> Not updated since 2011 but still online.

<sup>90</sup> <http://hasidismandlit.blogspot.co.uk>. Retrieved 17 June 2016.



she challenges their religious authority. While these differences might seem inconsistent to an outsider, they cohere in how *RFiedler* enacts her online identity as a religious woman; she may conform to all relevant religious practices, but she shows her readers that she does not do so unthinkingly.

Such enactment extends to engaging with commenters in a loose online community. One of the differences between blogging and, for instance, writing a diary, is that regardless of whether or not it is done under pseudonym or the blogger's real name, blogging carries the implication of a readership. On *RFiedler's* blog, these commenters were very active, both in support and highly critical of Hasidism. Her responses to comments often include arguments drawn from her own experiences. For instance, she states that she had never seen the sorts of behaviours among her immediate friends or among her parents' friends of inheritance in Hasidic communities being unfairly split between male and female offspring, an example mentioned by one of the commenters on her blog. Her blog is therefore an example of the sort of women-led religious authority online I will discuss in Chapter Four, showing both how religious authority online depends on many different sources, and that the online space is somewhere where women can lead negotiations about religious dress, in a public sphere.

Demonstrating that media misrepresentation is a challenge for Orthodox Jewish women as well as Muslim women, *RFiedler* draws the parallel between women writers enraged by Nobel Prize winner V.S Naipaul's comments that women writers in general write 'badly', and her feeling that she is misunderstood, as a member of a visibly different religious community. For her, blogging – or at least writing – has a role to play in beginning to alleviate that frustration:

For me, it was easy to recognize the passion that drove these hundreds of women to rant online. As a Hasidic woman, I feel this same compulsion, this need to “defend the honor,” each time I read a misinformed, erroneous article about Hasidism. I seethe, begin writing out blustering paragraphs full of adjectives, usually grinding my teeth as I write, sometimes yelling out the words I'm typing. Occasionally, the words actually develop into a coherent piece that I post on my own or a friend's blog. Mostly, though, I lose steam somewhere along the middle—typically after I've vented to fellow Hasidim on the phone—and the piece remains, orphaned and truncated, among my other unfinished essays or stories.<sup>91</sup>

However, despite her suggestion that she frequently runs out of steam when composing a counter-narrative, she did end up publishing this post. *RFiedler's* blog shows her to be sensitive to the role of writing and of the tropes that are used about her and her community, as the act of both writing

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<sup>91</sup> <http://hasidismandlit.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/protesting-naipuls-sexist-statements.html>. Retrieved 13 October, 2013.

and publishing implicitly challenges stereotypes about Hasidic women being oppressed and silenced

In the same blog post, *RFiedler* argues that it is not the responsibility of minorities, be they African Americans or Hasidic women, to correct inaccurate stereotyping about their groups by dominant groups. She asks herself, therefore, why she feels the need to do so. Her argument is that the multiplicity of voices against those who ‘believe and speak lies and stupidity’ shift the dominant narrative over time. In her case, this is not because she is consistently providing the same or similar arguments, but because writing and publishing from different first person perspectives challenges the idea that women are an equally oppressed monolith. Her reasons for blogging are thus more complex than simply providing a counter-narrative even when she argues that this is what she is doing. To make this argument, *RFiedler* uses the example of Martin Luther, ‘five hundred years ago’, being admired for saying that women should be at home and bear children. She compares the admiration enjoyed by Luther to the outrage that Naipaul’s comments attracted. She explicitly describes writing as having played a role in shifting these narratives:

Apparently, the efforts of the women and men who have railed and ranted and protested and fought and hammered on keyboards, have yielded results. Not perfect results (too many Naipuls still out in the world), but results, nonetheless. And so, I’ll keep pummeling away.<sup>92</sup>

Therefore, the negotiation between different ways of enacting a religious self-identity, which can include both narratives and counter-narratives, depend on both those telling (or writing) stories and a readership. Such negotiations including the secular societies the bloggers live in, but also the religious communities they interact with in their daily lives, their families, and the online space. The range of influences that *RFiedler* shows in her blog – including secular media such as documentary films like *Waiting for Superman*, fiction by Naipaul and Anthony Doerr, *The Gothamist* (a New York-based culture blog) as well as academic texts (such as Samuel Heilman’s *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*, 1999) – suggests that she is far from isolated from the cultural or intellectual influences of mainstream society. When she writes, therefore, she does so with a subtle understanding of both her own position as a Hasidic Jewish woman, and of the arguments about minority rights and women’s rights percolating in wider society. Such understanding is not exclusively about education levels however, although it does help challenge suggestions that religious observance is linked to lower levels of education, but also about access to information – something which is easier to do with internet access than was previously the case.

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<sup>92</sup> <http://hasidismandlit.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/protesting-naipuls-sexist-statements.html>. Retrieved 13 October, 2013.

Combining light-hearted illustrations with long blog posts, *Shpitzle Shtrimpkind's* pseudonym alludes to the partial wig worn by for instance observant married Satmar Hasidic women, the community that she was born into but has since left.<sup>93</sup> *Shpitzle* is highly critical of what she sees as secular society's attempts to 'liberate' Hasidic women. In a blog post published (under her real name, *Frieda*) on her more recent blog, *Oy Vey Cartoons*, entitled *On Hasidic Women*, she argues that, while she feels that she has outgrown the community and finds the roles accorded to women within it limiting, this is simply not the case for many of the women who remain. She frequently alludes to physical and spatial concerns that are part of women's religious practice. Such concerns are often enacted through religious dress, such as married women shaving their hair beneath their wigs, or the close relationship between dress, modesty and family life in her former community:

It is indeed true that Satmar women shave their heads. Yes, indeed they are taught not to use birth control. Yes, they are relegated to the women's section and unwelcome at male events. They are required to dress to the inch of the law of the town, and they do not choose their husbands. They send their underwear to the rabbi. They are not allowed to drive.<sup>94</sup>

However, *Frieda* argues that it is not the role of secular media to criticise such ways of life. Represented on her blog as monolithic and Other, the media is portrayed as failing to understand the nuances and benefits of life and religion within an ultra-Orthodox community such as Satmar Hasidism. *Frieda* places these considerations in the context of herself being someone who grew up in that community and whose blog showed her changing from being a strident supporter of a Satmar way of life, to choosing to leave the community altogether:

Chasidic women live in a radically different culture than the secular American culture, and their world is more complicated and nuanced than the mere sum of these rituals. Things that seem strange and unjust to outsiders are natural and non-issues to Satmar women. A combination of indoctrination and very little exposure to different ideas makes for a community of women who themselves know only a world of motherhood and piety. They invest themselves in the home and find power and passion within the framework of their available religious outlets.<sup>95</sup>

Importantly, *Frieda* points to a gender perspective on religious practice that links to Ammerman's arguments about lived religion, but which also emphasises the difference between the sort of

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<sup>93</sup> She originally blogged (2006 to 2007) at <http://shtrimpkind.blogspot.co.uk/>. In March 2011, she opened the archives again as a result of people asking her about how she came to leave her Satmar Hasidic community in Kiryas Joel. During the course of my research (in January 2012), she began blogging again at <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/>. This blog combines illustrations as well as writing, and while it has not been updated since July 2014, it too remains online. Both retrieved 2 September 2, 2016.

<sup>94</sup> <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/05/25/on-chasidic-women/>. Retrieved 26 June, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/05/25/on-chasidic-women/>. Retrieved 26 June, 2016.

religious authority that is associated with men, and that which is not only for women, but also by women.

While such forms of religious beliefs and practices were not satisfying for *Frieda* herself, she argues that it is for others. She argues that they may be indoctrinated and not informed about alternatives, but that their lives are far from powerless: their power, which they find within a religious framework, is simply different to that enjoyed by secular women. These standards appear to be maintained on the blogs, where, as I show in Chapter Four, women primarily shy away from discussing religious texts, and largely instead write about their everyday practices. While the feminisation of religion might appear to an outsider to be a more benign form of religious control, this is not necessarily the case:

As a woman's history student myself (yes, baby!), I often, in my studies, come across scenarios of women who voluntarily took upon themselves the most extreme stringency of religion. Nuns who fasted for days or Indian widows who jumped into the fire; these are extreme examples of women who embraced their religious, patriarchal setting and found passion and power within it. They did not want to be liberated.

When I was Chasidic, the women were the ones who were often the imposers of the law: the Chasidic women washed my back in the mikvah and commented on the length of my shaven hair; the women criticised my open neckline or sent me letters in the mail about my deviances; the women encouraged new rules to enhance community purity and stringencies.<sup>96</sup>

However, her respectful analysis and playful illustration of the way in which standards about religious practices challenge the implication that control by women would be any more lax or benign than control by men. *Frieda* has since left the community,<sup>97</sup> and she attributes her blogging with helping her find the confidence to do so, as well as giving her a creative outlet at a time when she was very young and living in an isolationist community.

Less playful than much of *Frieda's* blogging at *Oy Vey Cartoons*, but similarly an example of blogging used as a way of coming to terms with leaving a conservative religious minority community, the former Muslim woman who blogs at a *Sober Second Look* is very open about the fact that she is, as she writes, trying to 'recover from religious patriarchy'. This accounts for some of the critical tone of her discussion regarding how, for example, wearing the *hijab* is written and spoken about. She notes that a lot of the rhetoric surrounding religious dress circulating on the web

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<sup>96</sup> <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/05/25/on-chasidic-women/>. Retrieved 26 June, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Vize, F. (2012). 'Breaking from Hasidism, Online'. Tablet Mag. 10 July. <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/105719/escaping-from-hasidism-online>. Retrieved 4 August, 2012.

today, about it being an empowering ‘choice’, liberating women from being sexualised and that it is equally important for both sexes, sounds very similar to rhetoric about the *hijab* that was popular in North American Muslim communities she was part of (as a convert) in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>98</sup> She is deeply critical of the hypocrisy she experienced in the Muslim community she was a part of, which she refers to as ‘The Cult’, and explicitly uses her blog and other online resources as a way of addressing and working out her experiences. *A Sober Second Look* notes that members of her former husband’s extended family believe that she will return to the community,<sup>99</sup> though she herself argues that she prefers to not only have removed her *hijab* (‘de-jabbed’ in a phrase common on the blogs), and the moral uncertainty that is part of what she calls ‘Recovering from Patriarchal Religion’.

I included both *Frieda* and *A Sober Second Look* as an indication of the diversity of voices about religious dress on the blogs, as well as a suggestion that enacting religious identities online is done in very similar ways – regardless of whether one is staying, joining or leaving a conservative religious community. As former religious insiders, both *Frieda* and *A Sober Second Look* write critically about what they see as flaws in the communities they have left. However, because of the nuances and shared themes that they raise, these nevertheless read as much more balanced accounts of both the benefits and shortcomings of the role modest dress plays in women’s religious practice than those encountered in most the political debates referenced in the Introduction.

### 3.6 Subversion of secular expectations

Similarly nuanced understanding of secular expectations regarding the relationship between their religious dress and gender roles allow bloggers to subvert the same expectations – often through using humour. For instance, *Confessions of the Subjugated Wife*, contains the tagline ‘Confessions of the 30-something year old Jewish woman who covers her hair, which, of course, means that she is subjugated by her husband. Or maybe not.’<sup>100</sup> While she mocks assumptions that her hair-covering is an indication of her being ‘subjugated’ by her husband, she does not explicitly write about trying to change stereotypes about Orthodox Jewish women. Her blog, therefore, cannot really be read as a counter-narrative. Instead, she lists considerations such as a love of writing, procrastination and a vague hope that her writing may lead to other professional opportunities. She

<sup>98</sup> <https://sobersecondlook.wordpress.com/2012/06/08/hijab-empowerment-and-choice-the-darker-side/>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>99</sup> <https://sobersecondlook.wordpress.com/2014/09/22/what-salvation-looks-like-i-didnt-die-before-this/#more-1323>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>100</sup> <http://subjugatedwife.blogspot.co.uk/>. Retrieved 16 August 16, 2016.

also, however, lists ‘support’ from others as a one of the reasons for why she blogs, indicating the importance of an online community:

Blogging is not only about writing a blog, but also about reading others'. There's something oddly comforting and supporting in knowing that other people go through similar things and feelings.<sup>101</sup>

Since *Subjugated Wife* mainly writes light-hearted stories about her family and anecdotes of what happens in her office, so it is not clear what sort of blogging she feels offers her support. However, the reasons she gives for blogging are enough to encourage one of the commenters on the post to start a blog, also anonymously. *Subjugated Wife*'s hair covering is only part of how she enacts her religious identity online: important, but not all-encompassing. Nevertheless, alluding to her modest dress practices counters the assumptions readers may have about her relationship with her husband based on her religious dress practices, and is important enough to her that she chooses to use this as a central part of how she enacts her online identity.

Other uses of subversion can be playful or more sombre – or both. The anonymous blogger behind *why i wear hijab*<sup>102</sup> describes herself only as a ‘23-year-old hijabi’ who ‘attempts to confront the reasons’ [to wear the hijab]. Based on references in the main body of the blog, she is a liberal arts graduate of South Asian descent and based in the United States. For her, writing about religious dress is not only something she does for others, but also as part of enacting and making sense of her practice: she writes that if she cannot work out for herself why she wears it, she is unlikely to be able to accurately explain her reasons for doing so to the (many) others who ask about it. *whiyiwearhijab* has made it clear in responses to a commenter on a post about submission that beyond the physical reminder about God that the *hijab* (or Jewish *yarmulkes* – men’s head coverings, in response to an example in a comment) gives the bearer, it is a non-verbal communication to others about what she believes in.

While *why i wear hijab* describes her primary reason for wearing *hijab* being that she believes it pleases God, her attraction to its subversive characteristics is one of the themes that emerges repeatedly. One such mention includes her considering getting an eyebrow piercing as a contrast to the impressions she feels people have based on her ethnicity and her wearing the *hijab*:

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<sup>101</sup> <http://subjugatedwife.blogspot.co.uk/2008/07/my-10-reasons-to-blog.html>. Retrieved 16 August 16, 2016.

<sup>102</sup> <https://whiyiwearhijab.wordpress.com>. Retrieved 12 June, 2016.

Disillusioned by the stereotypes associated with hijab (meek, quiet, submissive), I felt the urge to rebel, to appropriate a form (piercings/tattoos) that's often used for that reason.

My nose is already pierced, but that's different. My perceived (and real) ethnicity makes it NOT weird and not rebellious that I have a nose piercing; it would be different if I were white. I don't remember where I heard this, but clothes and accessories are not worn on a blank canvas!

My already pigmented "canvas" is complicated further, of course, by the head covering. And so, I need (or I feel like I need) to offset or negate some of the messages it involuntarily sends.

While I didn't end up getting pierced—too chicken—the idea of nonconformity still appeals. (Should I pin this on the American individualist values I was instilled with? Maybe.) The appeal is dangerous, though. It has everything to do with context and conditions, and is that not the slipperiest slope you've ever seen?<sup>103</sup>

Even though she does not get an eyebrow piercing, and though wearing the *hijab* is primarily for religious reasons, she describes part of her satisfaction from being religiously dressed being that stems from its implicit subversion of wider cultural norms. Such subversion is not done in a vacuum, as she notices and enjoys the reaction it elicits in other people.

Her enjoyment of subverting secular stereotypes about *hijabis* is something that *why i wear hijab's* makes explicit in blog posts such as *Hijab and Submission vs. Subversion, part 2*.<sup>104</sup> After reminding the readers that Islam means 'submission' in Arabic, she admits that she herself is more interested in '**subversion**' (bold in the original). However, she is not interested in subverting Islam, but instead of wider cultural norms. She is drawn to wearing the *hijab* in part because it allows her to do both those seemingly contradictory things – submit to God's will, and subvert social expectations. She notes that the subversive element religious dress is because not only is Islam 'not the dominant religion' but also because '[r]eligious expression is also rare, and faith is considered largely a private matter. (Hijab is a visible, near-blinding example of religious expression.)' She thus enjoys transgressing the public/private divide that is a feature of secular societies, as discussed in Chapter One. Her confusing and subverting of cultural expectations of women, religion and *hijabis* can be personally satisfying, as can be understood from a later blog post<sup>105</sup> where a (male) friend of hers from work tells her that:

He said he didn't believe that I wore my headscarf for "all the normal reasons," for religion or anything like that. (Me: *what the?*) I just like being an outlier, he said, and I delight in

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<sup>103</sup> <https://whyiwearhijab.wordpress.com/2011/02/17/hijab-and-submission-vs-subversion-part-1/>. Retrieved 11 February, 2012

<sup>104</sup> <https://whyiwearhijab.wordpress.com/2011/02/19/hijab-and-submission-vs-subversion-part-2/#comments>. Retrieved 11 February, 2012

<sup>105</sup> <https://whyiwearhijab.wordpress.com/2012/03/04/ulterior-motives/>. Retrieved 12 June, 2016.



outlying in all the different identifiable categories. Surprisingly liberal hijabi, e.g., or surprisingly conservative feminist.<sup>106</sup>

Despite her initial irritation at his characterisation of her attitude more generally, she admits that he is accurate, and jokes about it, ‘Not too far off, I guess. Rebel Without a Keffiyeh, how does that sound?’<sup>107</sup> Religious agency does not preclude enjoyment of subverting cultural expectations of the majority. Drawing on Mol’s argument that lack of consistency does not mean chaos, enacting reality through both dress and blogging shows *why i wear hijab* submitting to and subverting cultural norms as part of enacting her online identity.

However, *whiyiwearhijab* seems to suggest in her final post on the blog (to date), that while she revels in confounding people’s expectations of her triggered by her *hijab*, she is both intimidated and compelled by the examples of other women who wear the *hijab*.<sup>108</sup> She describes them as being examples she aspires to, even as they are occasionally judgemental, but suggests that they occasionally make her feel inadequate. Nevertheless, she describes the *hijabis* she knows as her favourite people – an indication that the community she finds in other women who wear religious dress is in line with her own values. Such seeming contradictions are common on the blogs – many different aspects of religious dress are explored, and while they are not necessarily internally cohesive, this does not appear to be a problem for the bloggers.

### 3.7 Secular feminism and religious dress

Muslim bloggers sometimes describe themselves as being caught between male narratives that conceptualise them as pious and untouchable, or secular ones that do not account for their lived realities. The relationship between some of the bloggers and secular feminism are not without challenges. Part of this hinges on the concept of agency, as foreshadowed by Mahmood’s (2005) work, discussed in Chapter One. Their agency regarding religious dress appears to be understood as derived from both religious and personal sources, but the relevance of depending on agency as a justification for religious dress at all is something that the bloggers occasionally call into question. Blogging about *hijab* and *tzniut* in particular often emphasises the experiences, thoughts and feelings of individual bloggers, though always in context of a religiously adherent framework.

The relationship between feminism, dress and agency is not a clear cut one for many of these bloggers. Within the confines of orthodoxy, as two of the bloggers show, *niqab* can be worn

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<sup>106</sup> <https://whiyiwearhijab.wordpress.com/2012/03/04/ulterior-motives/>. Retrieved 12 June, 2016.

<sup>107</sup> A *keffiyeh* is a checkered scarf, often worn as a headscarf in the Middle East, but also worn as a fashion accessory.

<sup>108</sup> <https://whiyiwearhijab.wordpress.com/2012/08/13/girls-who-wear-hijab/#comments>. Retrieved 14 May, 2016.



both as a feminist<sup>109</sup> and as a non-feminist statement.<sup>110</sup> While many of the bloggers use the language of ‘choice’ as a way of legitimising their religious dress in terms of wider secular narratives about the importance of individual agency, some of the discussions show that such an explanation can contain many other concerns. Admittedly, the question of agency is also a concern for some of the bloggers themselves. As *Kochava* at *You’re Not Crazy*, a convert to Judaism, writes:

I'll even admit that I have these writers' concerns when it comes to the frum-from-birth community, at least to a degree. There is a well-publicized concern about domestic violence and get-withholding within the frum community, particularly the more insular the community. I worry that there are women in communities I don't know who do keep the laws of tznius just because that's "what's done" or simply because their husbands enjoy and/or require it.<sup>111</sup>

Even while acknowledging her concerns about other women’s limited choices and options, *Kochava* is careful to explain that those concerns need not be extended to herself. As part of explaining why, she demonstrates how similar enactments of religious dress can be part of very different life experiences:

HOWEVER, that does not mean there is not intrinsic value in the laws of tznius. Because they may be abused or "imposed" in some segments of Jewish society does not remove their intrinsic value. I have chosen these standards. On my own. No husband, no shidduch crisis, no rabbi forced these rules upon me. I think that G-d himself has provided me these rules for my benefit and growth.<sup>112</sup>

Being a convert, it seems, means that placed *Kochava* describes herself as being in a position where she appears to argue that her agency over her religious dress cannot be called into question. The dress rules are something that she simultaneously chosen, and had provided by ‘G-d’. Enacting her religious identity online shows her practice as being both the result of secular agency and divine command. Importantly, however, these are independent of male hierarchical structures or concerns about getting married (‘the *shidduch* crisis’).

Nevertheless, such an assertions of choice over religious dress does not entail a rejection of rabbinical authority, nor should it be read as an expression of misogyny. Instead, in a very typical

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<sup>109</sup><http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/for-me-niqab-is-feminist-statement.html>. Retrieved 14 May, 2016.

<sup>110</sup><https://kazemah.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/extreme/>. Retrieved 3 June, 2016.

<sup>111</sup><http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/orthodox-women-being-patronized-by.html>.

Retrieved 13 August 2016. A ‘get’ is a religious divorce, which a husband gives a wife. If a ‘get’ is withheld, a woman cannot remarry in a Jewish ceremony, as she is still religiously married. She is therefore considered an ‘*agunah*’ or ‘chained woman’, something which has increasingly become the focus of Orthodox Jewish women’s activism (Zion-Waldoks, 2015).

<sup>112</sup><http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/orthodox-women-being-patronized-by.html>. Retrieved 17 August, 2013.

construction of why religious dress is not an expression of misogyny, *Kochava* alludes to the fact that men are included in modesty rules as well:

And let's not forget that men also have dressing requirements for tznius (that are actually quite similar to women's requirements), but those requirements just happen to fit more snugly with secular society's view of what is appropriate for men's attire. Women's requirements are an issue because they buck secular society. In fact, they're practically revolutionary! But that's just my opinion. I've always been a "modest" dresser by secular standards precisely because I felt there was something wrong with the sexed-up attitudes of secular society, as well as having the typical self-esteem issues caused by that secular standard.<sup>113</sup>

The latter part of this paragraph, of course, echoes some of the themes discussed earlier in this chapter, both about subverting secular narratives about religious women's roles in their communities as well as the association between secular dress and women's self-esteem. These permeate much of the networks I study: that while some women struggle with aspects of modest dress, part of the enactment of being a minority religious woman in the sources I study is problematising the implications of secular ways of dressing, either on a personal level ('self-esteem') or wider social level ('sexed-up attitudes'). The seeming contradiction between writing that she has chosen something which she also believes to be a requirement is an example of how, in Annemarie Mol's phrase, disorder does not have to entail chaos when enacting reality.

Similarly, blog post from *Cover(ed) Girl*, a convert to Islam, seems to echo some of Jewish convert *Kochava's* concerns about the possibility that other women are forced to wear religious dress. The question of oppression and choice about religious dress is framed in the language that such transgressions are not part of her lived experience. Though less critical of secular kinds of dressing than *Kochava*, *Cover(ed) Girl* writes:

All this anti-niqab sentiment... I don't like it. Yes, I can see where some folks might have cause for concern -- but that's where we step in and lovingly educate them. Yes, I am against "forced Niqab" because it totally contradicts what hijab/niqab means to me -- namely, freedom. Having the choice is what makes it so beautiful.

However...given my online persona as a non-Muslim niqabi, I am totally an advocate of wearing what makes you comfortable. For some folks (like most of us), niqab and/or hijab is a level of coverage that is comfortable, in both a physical and spiritual way. My hijab/niqab

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<sup>113</sup><http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/orthodox-women-being-patronized-by.html>. Retrieved 17 August, 2013.

are things that allow me to place more emphasis on what should be emphasized -- God and my relationship with Him.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, both Jewish and Muslim bloggers engage with the concept that others might be coerced into wearing modest clothing. However, they are very careful to point out, or ‘lovingly educate’ their readers, that they themselves are not forced by an external persona to wear religious dress. Such ethical agency, in conforming to religious rules, is a large part of what makes it a valuable part of their practice.

However, even though the bloggers engage with concepts of choice regarding religious dress, secular feminism’s heavy and occasionally contradictory dependence on the concept, especially when it appear at odds with the idea of ‘liberation’, is part of why feminism sometimes fails to be a useful intellectual framework for these bloggers. Challenging secular feminism can be seen in writing by *hijabi* bloggers such as *AzMoo*. She argues that Western feminism remains ethnocentric, and engages with this aspect of writing by intersectional feminist writers such as bell hooks, in relationship to modestly dress Muslim women:

In relation to feminism, it’s worse. If you’re a feminist, or are familiar with the feminist movement and its many (and often diametrically opposed) opinion-factions, you’ll understand the complexity that arises from any controversial topic, and we’re one of them.

To some feminists, womens’ personal choice is paramount. It is the quintessence of feminism, the backbone of the movement. It super-cedes everything else. To other feminists, womens’ liberation is more important than womens’ choice. The two may not seem to be particularly opposed, but they are.<sup>115</sup>

Even though hooks, a noted third wave, intersectional feminist, argues in the text that *AzMoo* is writing about, that ‘There is no one path to feminism’ (hooks, 2000:116), she also states that patriarchal religious structures will ‘always undermine feminist gains’ (2000:108) until they are reformed (for instance, in line with Christian liberation theology). Even as hooks sees a need for feminism to consider women’s spiritual as well as practical needs, she regards this as by necessity a personal matter, or one done with other women, with the female body resisting male dominance. Consequently, hooks lists ‘veiling of women in Africa, India, the Middle East and Europe’

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<sup>114</sup> While this blogger has not converted to Islam at the point of writing this post, she does so later. <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/rage-against-niqab-and-other-ramblings.html>. Retrieved 7 June, 2016. Though her avatar also gives her name as ‘Heather’, I have chosen to use the name of her blog as a way of describing her throughout this thesis.

<sup>115</sup> <http://ninjagirlpower.wordpress.com/2012/04/13/does-modern-feminism-have-room-for-muslim-women-make-room-for-reema-the-riveter/#comments>. Retrieved 3 June, 2012.

alongside female infanticide in China and forced female circumcision as legitimate global concerns for Western feminists (hooks 2000:46) - a perspective clearly at odds with the lived experience of many Muslim women who wear religious dress, regardless of whether or not they self-define as feminist. *AzMoo*, in response to hooks, argues that Muslim women can fight for change in their own ways, which not only have a slightly different reasoning behind it, but will therefore also take a different manifestation in public, one which is appropriate for their concerns.

Similar reactions against the perceived desire among secular feminists to 'save' religious women arise on blogs written by Orthodox Jewish women. These, however, tend to be less explicitly about religious dress and more the maintenance of clearly delineated gender roles which they consider part of their identities as religious women. The occasional frustration with the tone taken by secular feminists about religious women, arguing over agency while disregarding that of those who do not wish for 'liberation', surfaces. Such frustration can be inferred from this post by *Lipstick and Brisket*:

Feminism therefore gives itself the right to decide who is on the side of oppression, versus who is on the side of enlightenment; who is on the side of wrong, versus who is on the side of right; who should be supported and celebrated, versus who should be questioned and re-educated. This ultimately means that the judgement and potential approval or disapproval of a woman's lifestyle still remains in the hands of another, contradicting the very point of feminism in the first place.<sup>116</sup>

Even as *Lipstick and Brisket* comments that she has great respect for some feminists, she herself does not self-define as such. Instead, she argues that taking a secular feminist approach to life would be incompatible with her worldview:

I ultimately draw my values from Torah Judaism, which permeates all aspects of life. I have the space to learn from a variety of ideas and people, and to use their insights to challenge my own logic. But my understanding of purpose and justice and my parameters for right and wrong are ultimately defined by my religion. It's a lifelong process of epiphanies, uncertainty, insights, and questions, to try and better understand exactly what those parameters are.<sup>117</sup>

Interestingly – in contrast to bloggers such as *Princess Lea at Frumanista*, who comments on the blog and also writes about modest dress on her own blog – *Lipstick and Brisket* has not yet blogged explicitly about dressing modestly. Instead, her blog posts about dress discuss things such as make up brands, shoes or whether or not it is worth wearing a 'uniform', in order to free up energy

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<sup>116</sup> <http://www.lipstickandbrisket.com/blog/?month=july-2015&view=calendar>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016.

<sup>117</sup> <http://www.lipstickandbrisket.com/blog/?month=july-2015&view=calendar>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016.

needed from planning what to wear. The main indication that she dresses modestly is in passing, from one of her commenters, and offline friend (indicated in the text) that:

Also, frum women can repeat shirts much more often because if we wear shells (undershirts) we just change those daily. When you wear your clothes directly on your body it's way worse to wear it again. Way worse!<sup>118</sup>

Part of how *Lipstick and Brisket* enacts her religious and gender identity online is through her ongoing posting about dress and being a mother and wife. Such seeming loose ends are, however, part of doing research online, where questions might arise and be alluded to, and then not be addressed again until much later, if at all.

### 3.8 Trying to conform more creatively

Shopping and writing about ways of wearing religious dress is an ongoing topic on the blogs. Creative conformity (Bucar, 2011) is not only expressed through the subtle variations of dress and opinion, but also how women approach and express their religious clothing choices in writing as well as in how they encourage their readers to follow suit. One of these ways is through reviewing and discussing different online brands of religious dress. This is especially interesting as both *tzniut* and *hijab* are concerned with modesty and tradition, which can be regarded as being at odds with fashion as a consumerist, rapidly changing structure. At the same time, women are meant to be attractive, and quite practically, require clothes if they are to be modestly dressed.

The reasons for the overlap between modest dress and consumption is perhaps best illustrated by *RFriedel*. She describes shopping and consumption as an easy way to be observant, despite the challenges against worldliness that are part of being religiously observant. In responding to a commenter who argues that Hasidic women spend too much time on their clothes, she explicitly places their dress within both a consumerist and a religiously adherent framework,

Your criticism of hasidic women who spend their lives keeping their homes clean and dressing their kids fashionably has merit. I don't, however, believe that it is hasidism that inculcates this standard ("daas torah" and Hebrew/Yiddish teachers consistently denounce materialism), but rather, the influence of A. secular culture and B. human nature. In New York, as in other cosmopolitan cities, fashion is huge. As I've said earlier, hasidim have always borrowed from and been influenced by their host countries or surroundings. Their obsession with looking good and dressing fashionably (albeit limited because of modesty standards) merely reflects that.

Furthermore, it's human nature to look for the easy way out. To think requires effort. Creative and intellectual endeavors require effort. Even reading something with depth

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<sup>118</sup> <http://www.lipstickandbrisket.com/blog/2015/8/3/would-you-wear-a-uniform>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016.

requires effort, which explains why Danielle Steele and John Grisham sell many more books than those who write works with literary merit. But shopping is generally easy and fun. In choosing to spend their lives in what you, apparently, consider a frivolous manner, these hasidic women are merely doing what most people do: living their lives expending as little mental effort as possible.<sup>119</sup>

Not only, then, can religious dress be seen as something challenging, constitutive of religious practices or a reminder of God – it can also be a relatively fun and easy way to be a religiously practising woman. That the ‘mental effort’ of being both stylishly but also religiously dressed is something that many of the bloggers enjoy is an underlying theme that pervades many of the blogs.

The seemingly contradictory considerations of modesty and consumption of stylish dress are enacted on blogs such as *One Chinese Muslimah*. In a somewhat inflammatory post entitled *A Lollipop Unwrapped*, she uses a common online image that compares unveiled women to unwrapped lollipops – attracting (polluting) flies – while the veiled Muslimah (wrapped lollipop) keeps her sweetness fresh for when it is needed. An ethnically Chinese Canadian convert to Islam, *One Chinese Muslimah* credits her conversion with changing her from being ‘extremely selfish, haughty, and ignorant’. This has not only been achieved through her increased ‘understanding’, seemingly both a mental and spiritual practice, but also enacted through her wearing the hijab:

But I remembered the number one reason why I was wearing the hijab. It was to represent my trust and my faith in Allah. It was to hide my beauty and be a modest and humbled Muslimah. I was representing one of Allah's servants and I should be thankful that he chose me to walk in his straight path!

After constant reminders and struggles with my nafs, I won.

I love the hijab so much, I can't picture myself without it.

I feel honoured when I step out into the world with my hijab on as it represents true respect and love for Islam.<sup>120</sup>

Being modestly dressed is thus something which both reminds her of her beliefs, signals it to others and continues, through ‘struggles with her nafs’ (soul, or ego) to shape her religious identity, both online and offline.

In another blog post, *One Chinese Muslimah* expands on her life and attitudes to dress before her religious conversion. Having been a fashion student and worked in the fitness industry, she describes herself as having been ‘obsessed’ with dress and appearances before her conversion to Islam. She describes this as not only superficial, but also both fiscally and emotionally exhausting:

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<sup>119</sup> <http://hasidismandlit.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/hasidic-women-equal-or-abused.html>. Retrieved 13 October, 2013.

<sup>120</sup> <http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/only-designer-you-should-be-following.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 12 September, 2015.

This later became extremely tiring, as I had to live up to an image that was much too hard to maintain. Just when I thought I had mastered the latest trend, a new one would emerge from the fashion world and I had to spend more money trying to maintain this image.<sup>121</sup>

The time-bound fashion cycle is something she describes herself as having followed mindlessly, at expense of her self-worth. 'Mastering' the latest trend also fails to offer either respite or enduring satisfaction.

Despite the extra layer of meaning she attributes to religious dress, she also argues that the clothes have always 'made the woman'. *One Chinese Muslimah's* interest in dress has therefore always had an element of representing something internal about herself. She explains that before she converted, she:

...started to feel like my gym clothes was what defined me and one specific brand would represent me and my lifestyle. Athletic clothing was comfortable and casual and it made me feel "myself". My love for yoga pants, fitted hoodies, and flip-flops or stylish runners was what I wore to represent myself.<sup>122</sup>

Following her religious conversion, and her enacting this new identity through religious dress, she considers herself to be changed from needing external validation about her dress. To differentiate herself from secular society, she alludes to the sexual promiscuity and need for male attention she considers inherent in how many secular women dress. Thus, she offers a more strident version of the perspective on the over-sexualization of women in secular society than the one offered by *Amara* in *The Hijab Project*, discussed earlier in this chapter. While deliberately distancing herself from consumerist and sexualised dress, her ongoing enthusiasm for clothing emerges through the blog. Thus, in that same blog post, she references the 'beautiful Saudi Arabian abayas' she wears, even as she argues that she no longer feels the need to demonstrate that she has good taste.

While her judgement of secular women's styles of dressing can make for uncomfortable reading for a secular audience, *One Chinese Muslimah's* ongoing interest in dress need not be seen as inconsistent. Having argued that dress is both a reflection and a formation of her religious identity, and one that she has struggled with in the past, she offers a product review of abayas she has ordered from the website *Sunnah Style*. Much of this review focuses how way the *abaya* feels

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<sup>121</sup><http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/do-clothes-make-woman.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 12 September, 2015.

<sup>122</sup><http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/do-clothes-make-woman.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 12 September, 2015.



and functions as a garment, rather than exclusively about how it looks. Her ways of interrogating dress is thus different than how she describes it having been before – it is no longer exclusively about what looks beautiful and is in fashion, but is instead about what feels good, what works with her glasses (as she covers her face) and what is durable. All of these considerations are in line with modest dress rules. However, *One Chinese Muslimah's* shifting perspective on modest dress does not entail that she has completely abandoned a sense of what is aesthetically pleasing. Even though she describes herself as being attracted to the fact that the models on *sunnahstyle.com* do not wear make up – presumably because she considers make up an indication of vanity – she also writes that one of the reasons she wanted to review dress from the brand was because she ‘just likes the way it looks’. Furthermore, she has deliberately chosen to buy a purple *abaya*, rather than a more conservative black one – possibly an indication of her continued affection for colourful clothing, and a change from her statement about only wearing ‘plain’ colours a few years previously.<sup>123</sup>

Such use of colour as a potential reflection of levels of modesty is also one which surfaces in her comments about her blog itself. In comments below the blog post about the clothes making the woman, one of the commenters mentions the colour of the blog (it appears to have been pink):

Just an observation, although pink color is mostly loved by girls/women [another fashionable issue huh?], but i find it difficult reading your pinked written notes. in my opinion if you can change the text color to a more legible one that would help more towards your goal of spreading the message of Islam and away from the pink textual fashion.

i hope you don't mind my criticism and thanks once more for effort in spreading the message of Islam<sup>124</sup>

Obviously eager to please, *One Chinese Muslimah* responds that her intent with having a pink blog was largely an extension of her affection for the colour, rather than as an indication of femininity. She adds that, as a former fashion student, it is not a colour that she associates with being fashionable. The commenter returns to explain that the main concern about the colour pink is that it is difficult to read, offering descriptions of how she might improve this situation:

Pink color is cool - keep it - nothing wrong with it all. However, you may wish to consider using deep pink #FF1493 so that it can contrast well with the background ash/grey color #CCCCCC.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> <http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2015/03/sunnah-style-review.html>. Retrieved August 16, 2016.

<sup>124</sup> <http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/do-clothes-make-woman.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 12 September, 2015.

<sup>125</sup> <http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/do-clothes-make-woman.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 12 September, 2015.



As a result, *One Chinese Muslimah* changes the blog within a day, asking for feedback on whether it is easier to read, which the commenter agrees that is. Even though this exchange is couched within the language of legibility and ease of reading, it suggests the importance of self-representation online as part of religious modesty: the visual language of such blogs is an avenue for future research.

On the bottom of her review of the *Sunnah Style abaya*, *One Chinese Muslimah* notes that she is available for other product reviews. The ties between consumerism and blogging about religious dress have not only been demonstrated by Emma Tarlo's work (2013), and show an interaction between being a consumer and enacting an online identity as a religiously dressed woman. Such reviews are very common on the blogs. The products reviewed are either supplied by the bloggers themselves, or, often, given to them as a means of marketing the product in return for a review. Blogging about ideas for religious dress and considerations around it are part of how online stores market themselves, showing that they have a close understanding and sensitivity about their consumers and roles in the marketplace. For example, the site *The Hijab City* has a blog attached to it, which displays suggested outfits and combinations of *hijabs* and other clothes.<sup>126</sup> These styles are also echoed in more individual blogs. For instance, *Chaviva at Kvetching Editor* has blogged about modest swimwear, and *QATheWorld*<sup>127</sup> writes extensively about *abayas*,<sup>128</sup> what she calls 'Islamic swimwear' (also called 'burqinis'),<sup>129</sup> Muslim children's books,<sup>130</sup> as well as ice cream<sup>131</sup> and kitchen supplies.<sup>132</sup> Enacting being a religious woman online can often, therefore, include self-representation as someone who is a savvy and considered consumer, as well as someone who takes the time to share tips and pitfalls of consumption with their online network. It is also, of course, a way in which many such companies market themselves online – being a modest dress company online is intrinsically tied with the identities such goods help enact.

Concerns about colour, self-representation but also the challenges of being creative and 'fun' especially if they are deliberately avoiding being part of the fashion-cycle, is also discussed on Jewish blogs. The repetitive element of wearing religious clothing is an important aspect of what

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<sup>126</sup> <https://thehijabcity.com/blogs/news/>. Retrieved 23 September, 2016.

<sup>127</sup> <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/>. Retrieved 10 October 2012.

<sup>128</sup> <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/tag/abaya/>. Retrieved 20 September 2016.

<sup>129</sup> <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/tag/islamic-swimsuits/>. Retrieved 20 September 2016.

<sup>130</sup> <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/tag/childrens-books/>. Retrieved 20 September 2016.

<sup>131</sup> <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/2012/05/21/arctic-zero-product-review/> and <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/2012/07/13/so-delicious-coconut-milk-ice-cream-review-chocolate/>. Retrieved 20 September 2016.

<sup>132</sup> <https://qatheworld.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/bialetti-aeternum-ceramic-coating-non-stick-frying-pan/>. Retrieved 20 September 2016.

gives it meaning within the context of the lives of the women whose writing I study. Much as the blogs themselves, religious dress can be both changing, and ongoing. In writing about her *Long Black Skirt*,<sup>133</sup> *Ruchi* describes how it is always useful and appropriate in relationship to both religious law and customs of different Jewish communities. However, she also expresses slight discomfort with how repetitive her use of such dress becomes:

Ok, confession: I have 6 long black skirts. Of course, they all serve different purposes (c'mon, ladies, it's like black shoes).

Why do I so very often wear a long black skirt?

Firstly, I ONLY wear skirts. According to halacha (Jewish law), which is the code by which I navigate my life, my skirt has to cover my knees at all times: sitting, standing, running (more on running later).

So to me, a "short skirt" is one that just covers my knees, and a long skirt goes till my ankles. Happen to be very trendy right now. Google "maxi skirt" and see what happens.<sup>134</sup>

Showing that religious dress is informed by the practical concerns of working inside the distribution of the fashion industry, she notes that the length she wants to wear is in fashion, and therefore easy to buy. Her considerations for what dress to wear may be different, but they at least in part depend on using the same channels of consumption as secular women. While her long black skirt adheres to the modesty requirements of even the most stringent of Jewish communities, *Ruchi* is not entirely satisfied with this element of her enactment of her religious identity.

Instead, she describes that she wishes to be seen as someone who otherwise embodies a more cheerful version of her religious beliefs. Such a wish suggests that she considers the colours of dress as symbolic of moods as well as of levels of observance:

Why black? It always matches, it's always appropriate, and it always looks clean.

But \*sigh\* I really don't like to wear black. Why? Because I don't want people to think that following halacha means living a dour, boring, colorless life. It's complex.

So there are things I do because I think they're good and right, and then there are things I do because I want others to think well of traditional, observant Judaism.

Does this complicate my life? Somewhat.<sup>135</sup>

While *Ruchi* claims that she wants to do something about her many black skirts, it is not entirely clear what that is. Arguing that her many black skirts are a wardrobe staple because they are suitable in a range of different Jewish communities, she concludes that she does not want to change this

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<sup>133</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/long-black-skirt/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 11 June, 2016.

<sup>134</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/long-black-skirt/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 11 June, 2016.

<sup>135</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/long-black-skirt/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 11 June, 2016.

aspect of her religious practice. While it may not be something she is completely happy with, all of the time, following Jewish religious law is more important to her than any other concerns about dress. Enacting these concerns on her blog indicates the various concerns about personal symbols that can be part of religious dress – even when such enactment, as here, does not appear to result in a discernible change in religious practice.

*Ruchi* is not alone in being concerned about how boring, if adherent, black clothing can be. The problem of finding good, modest alternatives to black dress is a concern for other some of the commenters. One of the commenters notes that she is trying to solve it through shopping:

...I also have a love/not love relationship with black. In the last two years or so, I have made it my shopping goal to buy things which are not black. Brown, navy, khaki, whatever. However, black is still such a great go-to color, even if I feel like it makes me feel a little more like a stereotype.<sup>136</sup>

It is not, therefore, how others might interpret her religious dress that matters – the concomitant ‘feeling’ like a stereotype of a religiously dressed woman is also something which this commenter tries to avoid. Whether or not *Ruchi* will actually begin to buy skirts in another colour is unclear. However, she describes this challenge in light of both modesty and of trying to overcome the limitations of representation:

But, eternal optimist that I am, I prefer to think of think of this confusing interface as a path to enriching my life.<sup>137</sup>

Modesty, however, is considered to be worth it, on all these blogs, and not something which should be changed or removed. Sharing tips about dress, both what is worth buying and what looks good together, is part of how women enact their online religious identities.

The subtle negotiations with herself and her online community about repetition and tradition are not only at work within an individual, but are also shown in the changes in religious practices in religious communities. Simultaneously indicating that dress practices are not static within communities, and that the same religious dress (a black skirt) can be used for different reasons, one of the commenters notes that:

I have an issue with the black/white/gray thing trickling down to little girls' clothes. When I was a kid, black was considered too mature for a young girl. Now, when I put my daughters in pink or florals – I look like the weirdo! Since when do little girls have to look like mini adults in black pencil skirts, etc.?

As for me, it's black because it's slimming. Pretty simple.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/long-black-skir/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 11 June, 2016.

<sup>137</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/long-black-skir/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 11 June, 2016.

<sup>138</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/long-black-skir/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 11 June, 2016.

This commenter might still wear religiously adherent dress, in fact the same ones that *Ruchi* does, but she argues that she does it to conceal a few extra pounds. Supposedly, these would instead be emphasised should she wear skirts and other clothes in brighter or lighter colours. Furthermore, by describing how the use of colour has changed as a standard of dress for girls throughout her lifetime, she indicates that such rules are not static within religious communities, nor that changes are necessarily accepted by women – even when refusing to conform makes her look ‘like a weirdo’.

### 3.9 Managing dress and costs through community and comparisons

While there are occasional allusions to costs of religious dress on the Muslim blogs, such as one of the commenters on *One Chinese Muslimah*’s blogs mentioning that she really likes *Sunnah Style*<sup>139</sup> but that’s she finds them expensive, or from *Kazemah* about the cost of different *niqabs*, the costs of Muslim religious dress tend not to be as high as for Jewish women who wear a wig. Although the bloggers cover their hair in a range of different ways, (including wearing a hat, a *teichel*, or headscarf, and a *sheitel*, or wig). However, part of the challenge of wearing a *sheitel* lies in both their cost and the maintenance they require. Ranging in price from around US\$1400 and up, they are a significant financial investment. Some Hasidic communities offer low-interest loans for them to be available to all married women, and some unwanted used *sheitels* are donated for poorer women in the community.<sup>140</sup> However, for those who wear a *sheitel*, it is not only a marker of a new time in their lives, but also a moment of communion with older generations of Jewish women.

The ‘*sheitel macher*’, who makes and styles wigs, is a transmitter of religious practices to younger women, as well as a reminder of a traditional trade. These practices, which are seemingly rooted in traditional community structures, are also beginning to accommodate the changes effected by and through the internet. For those who do not have ready access to the advice offered by *Princess Lea*, be it from friends and local *sheitel machers*, there are online options for reviewing sheitels to see which ones offer good value and style for the money. The wittily named review website *shaytell.com*,<sup>141</sup> with the tagline ‘Not your mother’s shaitel’, gives both businesses selling wigs and consumers a way of showing the quality and limitations of different styles. This is also something that is done on first person blogs, such as *askchavi.com*, which was updated between

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<sup>139</sup> <http://www.sunnahstyle.com>. Retrieved 10 August, 2016.

<sup>140</sup> Greenbaum Kasson, Elisabeth (2010). For devout Jews, a zone of privacy in the *sheitel*. *Los Angeles Times*. 31 October. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/31/image/la-ig-wigs-20101031><. Retrieved 2 April, 2012.

<sup>141</sup> <http://shaytell.com/>. Retrieved August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

2011 to 2015. It was exclusively about wigs, not only advising on which wigs to buy, but also how to care for them, such as combing out knots, shampooing them, which salons she thought were good with wigs, etc. Evidently, enacting this aspect of religious dress is both rooted in tradition and evolving. It is also far from untouched by globalisation, concerns about ritual impurity of hair bought from Indian Temples caused a scandal when certain rabbis declared them unfit for use in 2004 (Tarlo, 2016). Such controversies, however, seem to have been subsumed under practical measures, such as certifying that natural hair is bought from European sources (see for instance <http://www.sheitel.com/>). However, as my research did not predate the scandal of 2004, I cannot tell if there has been a change in the attitude on the blogs since then; another reason for wanting European hair may also be that it more closely mimics the texture and colours of hair that are considered desirable in different Jewish communities.

Looking after a wig and choosing one can still require a *sheitel macher*. According to *Gitel*, a Brooklyn based *sheitel macher*, one route for a bride, or '*kallah*', (only married women are required to cover their hair) to go in choosing her *sheitel macher* is by following family tradition:

This is going to potentially be a very personal experience, hopefully not too traumatic for the *kallah*, so who you go to is as important as which wig you pick. The most obvious choice is your mothers *sheitel macher*, but its not always the best. She may be able to transition from her 40-something clientele to a 20-something's style and taste, but its not just about the cut. Its also about personality, compatibility and communication, and if a *kallah* is not comfortable expressing herself and her opinion, she may come out of the whole experience with the wrong results. If a girl has a long relationship with her mom's stylist, that just might work.<sup>142</sup>

The styling of the wigs is important, as it can be quite difficult to change. Another interesting part of this post, however, is the understanding that younger women and older women are likely to want different styles of wigs. Being a religiously dressed woman online includes acknowledging that it is acceptable to be concerned about your appearance – as long as it is within a modestly dressed framework.

Similarly describing offline experiences as part of enacting her online identity, another blogger, *Derech Taken*, emphasises the sense of community she derives from visiting her *sheitel macher* following her second marriage. For a secular reader, her account of being at the *sheitel macher's* reads very much like being at the hairdressers, though with an added religious dimension:

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<sup>142</sup> <http://bellabusta.tumblr.com/post/14458818439/buying-a-new-wig-advice-from-a-shaitel-macher>.

Retrieved 2 April, 2012.

So this time around, I've been taking my time dealing with the sheitel thing. I had two headband falls from the first marriage, one of which was salvageable and one which, sadly, has now been demoted to a hat fall (soon to be further demoted to a gemach donation). Shaindy miraculously managed to rework my old full sheitel into a much more modern look, and I bought a new one from her that is totally foxified. All the while she's been working on these, I've told her the saga of my marriage/remarriage (she's divorced and remarried too, though not to the same person), complained about my boss, shot the breeze about different business ideas, talked about my new community, old community, tried to fix up some single friends on blind dates, etc. She takes a break while working on me to nurse her baby, make us a cuppa joe, and do her own stretch of kvetching. My sister-in-law drops by with her own sheitel issues while we are there. Other women step in and out waiting for their appointments. We walk around with our hair showing, our shoes off, our jackets and purses piled up on the waiting room divan. We play Jewish geography, compliment each other on our shoes, complain about the economy, talk about books we are reading, classes we are attending, drink Shaindy's coffee, and just hang. And buy sheitels.<sup>143</sup>

As one of the commenters rightly points out, the blogger is living in a community that encourages and promotes marriage as the basis of the social fabric. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the ongoing markers of time in a person's life, the *sheitel*, is related to marriage.

The relationship between marriage and wig-wearing can give the wearing of a wig romantic connotation. *Kate*, also known as *Challah Back Girl*, has written about her conversion to Judaism in part as an expression of rejection the shortcomings of contemporary feminism,<sup>144</sup> she blogs on clothing brand *Mimu Maxi*'s blog about how much she would like to wear a wig. While she has previously described her extensive struggles with having to give up clothing that she loved from before her conversion,<sup>145</sup> she frames this as being a challenge that she has now overcome. However, she has a more romantic view of wigs. In a post entitled *Sheitel Envy*, she describes how it is something she is looking forward to, both because of the frustrations of not being able to do her hair on Shabbos (the Sabbath) but also because she finds wigs, which only married women wear, beautiful,

I know I'm not supposed to covet anything that is my neighbor's, but oh, I have sheitel envy. It just doesn't seem fair that women who have already landed their beshert get to have better hair, too. Make no mistake, I am not looking to take anyone's sheitel from them...But even on days other than Shabbos, when I've had a blowout to make up for my Shabbos hair, I look around at other women during Jewish events and see gorgeous, glossy wigs of every length, style, and color. What really gets me, though, is their enthusiasm. It's contagious.

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<sup>143</sup> <https://derechtaken.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/culture-ofsheitels.html>. Retrieved 27 September 2016.

<sup>144</sup> <https://ladymamale.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/the-feminist-mistake.html>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

<sup>145</sup> <http://ladymamale.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/closet-case-converts-struggle-with.html>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.



Jewish women love their sheitels. And I find myself thinking, "Wow, I cannot wait to wear a wig."<sup>146</sup>

*Kate's* desire for more, not less, religious dress is framed as an acceptance of her changed relationship with religion. The relationship she covets is not only that between herself and a husband, but also, in something which appears to echo Mol's description of the lack of usefulness of a divide between subject and object, the love Jewish women feel for their wigs.

As a result, blogging about wearing a *sheitel* is a further enactment of identity through religious dress, at a time when unmarried *Kate* cannot wear one. She frames wearing a wig as a way of fulfilling religious obligations in a beautiful way, even if both the aesthetics and gender roles are embodied in a way that she found shocking or off-putting at earlier stages of her conversion to Judaism:

I should probably confess here that I really had a problem with the idea of wearing a wig when I began studying for my Orthodox conversion. I knew people who had had all manners of plastic surgery, which I didn't blink at, but the thought of covering my hair, and with more hair, to boot, was just so weird to me. As I grew in my observance, my education, and my contact with Orthodox Jews, however, I realized that I had been projecting my negative associations with religion onto these women. For so many years, I had viewed organized religion as oppressive and restrictive. So, even as I was falling in love with Judaism, it took a while for me to realize that the mitzvot are not taken on grudgingly, but with excitement for the opportunity to fulfill a commandment of Hashem. For this reason, we aim to perform each mitzvah as beautifully as we can. A wig not only allows a married woman to perform the mitzvah of covering her hair, it also reflects the beauty of her devotion to her family. I finally got it: It's not about who's on the market and who isn't. A married woman should look even more beautiful than a single one, because she has the beauty of more mitzvot on her side.<sup>147</sup>

Her changed attitude to both 'organised religion' and religious dress has altered as a result of her 'falling in love' with Judaism. Rather than exclusively being a spiritual experience, this love transforms her perception of the aesthetic value of wigs, making something 'weird' something 'beautiful'. They become an enactment of a *mitzvah*, and are thus rendered both religiously and aesthetically pleasing.

By contrast to the 'beautiful' covered hair, natural hair is marked by not having undergone the same religious transformation. For *Kate*, therefore, there is nothing contradictory in having a

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<sup>146</sup> <http://ladymamale.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/sheitel-envy-goodbye-shabbos-hair-i.html>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

<sup>147</sup> <http://ladymamale.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/sheitel-envy-goodbye-shabbos-hair-i.html>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

wig that is as beautifully styled as possible. Since it is done within the rules of religious Orthodoxy, it takes on a meaning that enhances its beauty, which in turn is more apparent to her now that she has come to ‘fall in love’ with Orthodox Judaism. *Kate* argues that seeing her tangled hair on the Sabbath (when she cannot style it), is a sort of test of faith for her future husband (her ‘*besher*’, which is Yiddish for soulmate). Her physical limitations will not be in the way of that person wanting to share a (Jewish) life with her:

In a way, it’s very fitting that my *besher* will see my Shabbos hair in all its tangled glory before he puts a ring on it. One, if it doesn’t scare him off, he’s a keeper. But more importantly, Judaism teaches that a person can transform even their greatest weakness into their greatest strength. My husband, as my partner in life, will accept me and all my flaws—physical and spiritual—and then he will help me turn each one into something beautiful.<sup>148</sup>

Here, then, the artifice of a modestly dress wig is somehow more *real* than the hair that grows out of *Kate*’s head. It is part of the enactment of being a modestly dressed religious woman. Writing about it on a fashion blog, even if one run by a woman who owns a religious fashion brand, shows the close relationship between personal blogs, consumption and religious practice. They appear to be different but complimentary aspects of enacting what it means to be a minority religious woman in the online space.

Such a desire for wearing a wig is not only something which converts experience, but is also a part of how FFB Jewish bloggers might enact their future religious practices. Consequently, *Bad for Shidduchim*, whose pseudonym is a joking reference to how her blogging might get in the way of a matchmaker helping her get married, writes about how she is both tempted and worried about wearing a wig when she gets married. Much like *Kate*, she dislikes how her hair looks when she has not been able to do anything about it a religious holiday. Jokingly, she suggests that several days of not washing her hair is a reason for long religious holidays:

I think there’s another reason Hashem gave us three-day *chagim*. So that we’ll dream of wearing a *sheitel*. Hair you can hang up at night. Hair that looks the same the next morning. Hair that, if you don’t like how it looks, you can just put away.<sup>149</sup>

Less romantically than *Kate*, *Bad for Shidduchim* is still attracted both to the idea of being married and of covering her hair once she is married, enacting her different status as a married religious woman. She is tempted, therefore, because she will have the opportunity to have different and

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<sup>148</sup> <http://ladymamale.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/sheitel-envy-goodbye-shabbos-hair-i.html>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

<sup>149</sup> <https://badforshidduchim.wordpress.com/tag/hair/>. Retrieved 20 May, 2016.



attractive hair, but also worried, because it can end up being styled terribly because it does not grow out, she would be left with an ugly haircut for a long time. Annoyed at her community for settling on overly conformist styles, she suggests to them that ‘you know you can get different hair’. Indicating how such religious dress is also used as a set of symbols for religious insiders, she seems to derive satisfaction from being able to identify a married woman who is wearing a wig, which her, presumably not-Jewish, friend is unable to do.<sup>150</sup>

### 3.9 Ethnic diversity and the challenges of modest dress

The challenge of the offline association of religious identities with certain ethnic groups in North American, and the relationship between dress and ethnically-associated beauty standards, demonstrates how the internet can provide a space for negotiating different, sometimes seemingly incompatible, identities. *Invisible Muslimah* enacts her online identity as a (sometimes) religiously dressed Muslim woman; being African American is part of why she describes herself as ‘invisible’. This is apparently not a nod to Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man*, but a response of the general under-representation of African Americans as Muslims in the public sphere. She sometimes wears the *hijab*, and sometimes does not,<sup>151</sup> but has continued to blog about being a young Muslim woman going through life, crises of faith, medical school and finding ways to combine her religious practice with how her life is developing.

She has blogged about the challenges of wearing the *hijab* over naturally curly, African American hair. Hair covering is something she finds both seductive and challenging. Not only is her hair likely to break under a *hijab*. She also struggles with wanting to be proud of her naturally curly hair, rather than regarding it as something which should be straightened or ‘relaxed’ to conform to Western beauty standards. Her online support about hair and hair covering in this is not primarily from her online Muslim community, but from the natural hair community. She quotes several blogs that she reads regularly which have helped her learn to love her hair.<sup>152</sup> While she might not personally find them useful, there are blog posts on aggregation blogs such as *We Love Hijab* about managing Black hair beneath a *hijab*,<sup>153</sup> including frequent references to the benefits of having natural hair beneath the *hijab*. However, similarly to *Allison at Jew in the City*, *Invisible Muslimah*

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<sup>150</sup> <https://badforshidduchim.wordpress.com/2010/04/19/shear-frustration/>. Retrieved 20 May, 2016.

<sup>151</sup> <http://invisiblemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/uncensored-part-of-that-world.html>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>152</sup> <http://invisiblemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/what-if-i-love-my-hair.html>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>153</sup> <http://welovehijab.com/2009/03/17/my-hijab-is-making-me-bald/>. Retrieved 6 September, 2016.

also describes herself as having found self-love through modest dress, which allows her body to be less relevant as she passes through the public sphere.<sup>154</sup>

By contrast, other bloggers who are women of colour argue that wearing religious dress has not helped them integrate with their offline community, and may even have been a barrier. One of the challenges they describe is the roles of other women within religious communities in the reinforcement of religious practices. While women in the blogosphere are often supportive online, this is sometimes in contrast to the challenges converts face offline – especially if they are not light skinned. *Jamerican Muslimah* argues that beauty standards from the community are entrenched and exacerbated through racially difficult dialogues. A black convert to Islam, she describes her skin colour as a barrier to full acceptance within her local Muslim community:

Beyond all the beautiful speeches given to me by my Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean Indian, and Arab brothers and sisters I realized that being Black, a woman and a convert made me less than. The litmus test was marriage. I watched as my fair-skinned Latina friends were repeatedly asked for their hand in marriage. I watched as the White female converts were held in high esteem and absorbed into immigrant Muslim families (their babies will be so fair, *mashallah*!) and I laughed inwardly... Before becoming Muslim I was confident and proud of the color of my skin, the texture of my hair, the shape of my nose and of my slave ancestors. How did I move from that to being ashamed of taking off my hijab at sisters' only events?<sup>155</sup>

Similarly to *Invisible Muslimah*, her religious dress exacerbates parts of the concerns she has about her hair, which she had previously been proud of as a visible reminder of her ancestry. Hair covering is not only a different challenge given the texture of her hair, but is also set in the context of reclaiming black hair as beautiful, as discussed by *Invisible Muslimah*.

However, such discussions should also be seen in the context of the wider context of converts trying to find their place in offline religious communities. For instance, even when *Jamerican Muslimah* moves to a predominantly African American mosque, the competition for men to marry is something that she mentions in relationship to being modestly dressed and attractive. Being modestly dressed and young is something which is inherently threatening to the other women in her mosque:

One would think that moving to a predominately African-American Muslim community would've been better for me. I thought I would find myself welcomed into my local W.D.

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<sup>154</sup><http://invisiblemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2015/04/body-of-confessions-big-legs-tight-skirt.html>.

Retrieved 4 October, 2015.

<sup>155</sup><https://jamericanmuslimah.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/to-be-a-black-convert-muslim-female/>.

Retrieved 23 August, 2016.

Muhammad masjid with full and open arms. I was coming home! However, from the moment I set foot in the masjid I immediately knew I was an outsider, not to be welcomed in. This time it wasn't because of my skin color or cultural background. I was an outsider because I wasn't part of the Nation of Islam experience and I didn't have an entire family who was. I was also an outsider because I was attractive, single and a threat to the sisters. The fact that I wore abayas, full hijab and tended to be more conservative (due to the years I spent in immigrant Muslim communities) didn't help either. Sure, I could come to Jumah, participate in community events or even help out with the tasks the masjid administration assigned to me but I got the message loud and clear: don't think you're going to come in here and change things or try to be a better Muslim than us.<sup>156</sup>

The competitive element of religious dress is one that is challenged on the blogs, but which appears to remain part of the offline structures. The desirable quality of women being modestly dressed is rarely alluded to directly, but is occasionally something that surfaces in comments, or as something someone has said to the bloggers.<sup>157</sup> One of the reasons why so many of the bloggers are converts might be because blogging offers an outlet for those who struggle to fit in offline, offering a compliment to offline communities and practices. What is clear, however, are the many challenges faced by converts to both Judaism and Islam, who like *Jamerican Muslimah* or *Aliza at Memoirs of a Jewminicana*, are people of colour. The latter, a Dominican American writer and educator who converted to Judaism and is married to a rabbi, has written extensively about the experience of being a person of colour in the community, and that the challenges of covering her hair are very different to those of women who have Caucasian hair. Her challenges she finds in covering her hair can be read as stand-in for the challenges about acceptance she finds in the community in general,<sup>158</sup> which includes a lack of understanding or acceptance of her different hair, including when she has to go to the *mikveh* (ritual immersion) and have it combed.<sup>159</sup> Online, there is no need for them to diminish different aspects of their identities, but they can indeed enact these in their multiple forms. The importance of being able to enact all aspects of their multiple minority identities, as evidenced by the pseudonyms chosen by all three bloggers in this section. Rather than arguing that this is an example of pick'n'mix religious identities and practices, it seems instead to be a more accurate enactment of these women's concerns than they feel are readily understood about them in an offline context.

### 3.10 Dress is not static

While the Muslim and Jewish bloggers may change and alter their dress styles over time, the quotidian nature of it is part of its importance to enacting religious identity. Religious dress changes

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<sup>156</sup> <https://jamericanmuslimah.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/to-be-a-black-convert-muslim-female/>.

Retrieved 23 August, 2016.

<sup>157</sup> <http://invisiblemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/uncensored-part-of-that-world.html>. Retrieved September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016

<sup>158</sup> <http://www.alizahausman.com/2010/03/hair-covering-adventures-of-me-and-my.html>. Retrieved 10 October 2015.

<sup>159</sup> <http://www.alizahausman.com/2009/11/mikvah-and-black-hairstyles.html>. Retrieved 10 October 2015

for different reasons. For example, *Kazemah* discusses how she struggles with wearing the *niqab*. She oscillates between describing *niqabs* that she really likes, which she is unhappy when she appears to have lost, or being excited about finding a bikini for when she's going on holiday to a place that has a private pool, or that she 'loves' *niqab*. Her wearing the *niqab* has changed over time. For instance, she writes that:

When I first started wearing niqab, I was sooo confident. No one could tell me anything. I don't know where this lack of confidence and lack of strength has come from. It bothers me so much. Why do I keep fearing what these people will think of me, what they will possible do, when I know (or at least should know) my Lord protects me and it is His Pleasure I should be seeking. No one elses. Niqab is a part of me. I love my niqab, so why am I leaving it at home so casually these days. I won't anymore. I would much rather be stared at, than feel like I'm not putting my trust in Allah. Than feel like I'm giving up pleasing Allah to please His creation. I have to remind myself Paradise is surrounded by hardships, while Hell- Fire is surrounded by things that seemed pleasing and easy. So back off shaytan... my niqab is getting worn insha Allah! Lol<sup>160</sup>

She writes about many different considerations about whether or not she wear her *niqab*, or whether she 'just' covers her hair. According to her blog, she believes that hair covering is a requirement in Islam. Beyond covering her hair, she also strives to wear the *niqab* as she considers it more pious. However, as suggested by the quotation above, she sometimes finds the social implications of wearing a *niqab* difficult. Her responses to how she is received when wearing the *niqab* are not necessarily consistent; sometimes she finds it rude that little children call her a ninja, other times she appears charmed by unknown children's surprise that her appearance. Her commenters are frequently supportive when she describes herself as struggling with wearing the *niqab*, encouraging her to keep going despite the difficulties. But she also describes herself as loving the *niqab* as an enactment of the faith she puts in Allah. One of the important results of my research is not only that are religious dress practices not static, but they are not necessarily linear.

In 2011, *Chaviva* at *Kvetching Editor* ran a series of blog posts entitled *The Tzniut Project*, where women (and a few men) who were either regular readers of the blog or otherwise associated with *Chaviva* offered lengthy, anonymous responses to a questionnaire. While I have chosen not to interview subjects myself, the fact that this questionnaire surfaced on a blog I follow regularly indicates that questions about religious dress and its relationship to religious practice and identity are relevant to members of the community themselves. Seemingly mundane decisions about clothing interact with one of the participant's beliefs:

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<sup>160</sup> <https://kazemah.wordpress.com/2012/12/23/confessions/>. Retrieved 19 May 2016.

... currently in a skirt-wearing phase (I've gone back and forth re: pants versus skirts vis a vis *tzinut*) so I must say there's not much difference in my dress between weekday and Shabbat. I try to wear nicer/newer clothing on Shabbat but can't say I'm very strict about this. The reason I think to wear nicer/newer clothing on Shabbat is to make Shabbat more special, to give it *kavod* (honor). In warm weather I will go to synagogue without hose. I usually wear sleeves of some kind but am not strict on length nor on neckline.<sup>161</sup>

Even in this short passage, the many different aspects of religious dress are apparent. Vitally, this woman frames her internal debates about whether to wear pants or skirts in relation to her understanding of how to enact *tzinut*. Wearing skirts is considered a more conservative interpretation of *tzinut*. Skirts are not only less form-fitted, but they also adhere closely to the injunction of *kli gever*, the rule which prohibits women to dress as men.<sup>162</sup> Her choice here, therefore, is not only one under frequent re-negotiation, but is also done with religious tenets in mind. Differentiating between what she wears on Shabbat and on the other days of the week, even if she is not 'strict' about this, is a further way in which this blogger's clothing is closely related to her religious practices. She interprets what she wears as a way in which she gives 'kavod' to the Sabbath; her clothing choices are a part of how she expresses adherence to this central tenet of Jewish law. However, she also considers her physical comfort by not wearing hose when it is hot; her dress practices are not only adherent and personal but driven by physical concerns and well as religious ones.

As suggested by the mention of what the woman cited in the *Tzniut Project* wears on the Sabbath, dress practices are also not necessarily static throughout the week. The fourth out of nine questions addresses the repetitive element of religious clothing:

4. What would you wear on a typical day? On *Shabbos*? If you dress differently on weekdays and *Shabbos*, why do you make this distinction and how?<sup>163</sup>

Here, wearing different dress is an indication of honouring the Sabbath (*lichvod haShabbos*). Similarly, *Princess Lea* at *The Frumanista* describes finding make up and hairdos that will stay attractive without her having to top them up or correct them. One respondent's answer gives an indication of how repetitive these clothing practices can be:

On a typical day I wear a high neck undershirt, some sort of nice shirt or sweater, a skirt, a fun necklace (I am really into fun accessories), and a cute pair of shoes. On *Shabbos* I tend to wear much fancier clothes to enhance the *kedusha* of *Shabbos*. During the week, I wear

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<sup>161</sup> <http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/2011/05/tzniut-project-7-giving-kavod-to.html>. Retrieved on 13 January, 2012.

<sup>162</sup> *Begeid isha* is the corresponding rule for men.

<sup>163</sup> <http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/search/label/The%20Tzniut%20Project>. Retrieved 13 January, 2012.

my two falls (either my hat fall with a hat or scarf, or my full fall with a bit of bangs pulled out to look more natural) and on Shabbos I tend to wear my full *sheital*. I will admit that I dress up more than the normal person during the week. I feel better about myself when I feel confident about the way I look. On Shabbos I dress up more than usual. I wear heels, put on more makeup, wear my nicest clothes. I feel that dressing up more for Shabbos is a big part of *lichvod haShabbos*.<sup>164</sup>

She describes feeling more confident when she dresses up and that this is part of how she honours the day, through different hair covering, make up and feminine shoes. Such special emphasis on the dress worn on the Sabbath is an indication of the different ways in which the Jewish and Muslim calendars divide time. Marking different times through spaces and dress in this way is also done by the Muslim bloggers. In Chapter Four, I quote *Nahida* at *The Fatal Feminist* describing how she only wears the *hijab* to the mosque, deliberately (and provocatively) wearing red lipstick to pray: a seeming contradiction which, for her, enacts both how much she complies with and challenges modest dress as an observant religious woman.

### 3.11 Conversion and wanting to conform

Blogging about religious dress can also be a way of joining a religious community. The different processes involved in conversion to Judaism and Islam, as discussed in Chapter One, are relevant to the stages of the conversion process at which the bloggers tend to write about religious dress. In Sunni Islam, which most of the Muslim bloggers mentioned in this chapter belong to, formal conversion occurs through reciting, with understanding and belief, the *Shahadah*.<sup>165</sup> Once someone has converted to Islam, their life as a Muslim begins. This includes past sins being forgiven, often a new name, and the wider work of living a Muslim life, in accordance with the Five Pillars of Islam.<sup>166</sup> Muslim women tend to blog about the time after conversion, while the Jewish women blog both before and after their formal conversion. Believers themselves might argue that they have ‘always’ been religious, whether because of their cultural and family history, or because they believe that their religious conversion is the result of their souls ‘returning’ to a religion. As a note on language, the term ‘reverts’ is sometimes used about converts to Islam, as a reflection of the belief that everyone is born Muslim, but that external factors such as parental influence might cause someone to practice a different religion (Olsson 2009:284). Noticeably, and perhaps surprisingly, the language of ‘reverting’ rather than ‘converting’ to Islam is not prevalent on blogs I study, though the sentiment of conversion as a religious homecoming does arise. Similarly, while openly a convert

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<sup>164</sup> <http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/2011/05/tzniut-project-7-being-attractive-not.html>. Retrieved 13 January 2012. *Kedusha* is a prayer recited on the Sabbath.

<sup>165</sup> The profession of faith, which in English reads: ‘There is no God but God and Muhammed is his Prophet.’

<sup>166</sup> The *Shahadah* is the first of the Five Pillars of Islam. The following four are: *Salat* (the five daily prayers), *Zakat* (a form of charity or tax that goes to the poor), *Sawm* (fasting during Ramadan) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) (Gordon 2010:63-65).



first to Reform and then to Orthodox Judaism, *Chaviva*, who blogs at *Kvetching Editor*, describes her pre-conversion self in terms such as: ‘It’s the truth I have to accept, my *neshama* stood there with a child, it seems, awaiting the Torah.’<sup>167</sup> However, the different interpretations of how the soul, or *neshama*, becomes or pre-exists as Jewish, or the spiritual mechanics of conversion to Islam, are beyond the scope of this project.

Religious conversion is often enacted on the blogs through descriptions of changing to wearing religious dress, which may or may not later be a source of embarrassment for the bloggers. Such (later) embarrassment is alluded by *Wood Turtle*’s descriptions of how and why she began wearing religious dress following her conversion to Islam:

I put it on because:

- a) it was mentioned in the Qur’an as a practice for “believing women” to help you become aware of God;
- b) I was still in the throes of convertitis, and was really, really eager to follow all aspects of my new religion with enthusiastic abandon; and
- c) I wanted people to know I was Muslim.<sup>168</sup>

This post is part of a longer series about *Wood Turtle*’s different stages of wearing religious dress. Her early concerns are primarily about following religious rules when enacting her religion. Linking language and dress as ways of enacting religious identity, she adds:

One of the major symptoms of convertitis is that you want everyone to know that you’ve accepted a new Truth. So I’d be in everyone’s face, dropping Islamic terms, or coming up with any excuse to mention that I was Muslim. Hijab would remove that overbearing need, as it’s pretty much a no-brainer when you see a headscarf to guess the religion.<sup>169</sup>

However, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, while *Wood Turtle* continues to wear religious dress, her attitude to it is not linear and unchanging.

Wearing religious dress can therefore mark the beginning or a change to a religiously driven way of life, as suggested by one of the responses to a post on the blog *Hijabtrendz*.<sup>170</sup> One of the commenters, *malaak-jayne* (a convert to Islam), describes her commitment to wearing hijab as a turning point in her life:

...when i converted to islam humdeAllah i made a promise to wear hijab for the rest of my life from first day; excluding one day, any day in my life and wedding day. i thought it

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<sup>167</sup> <http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/2009/05/i-stood-at-sinai.html>, Retrieved on January 13, 2012

<sup>168</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/hijab-5-0-part-two/>. Retrieved 12 March, 2016.

<sup>169</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/hijab-5-0-part-two/>. Retrieved 12 March, 2016.

<sup>170</sup> <http://www.hijabtrendz.com/2010/03/30/behind-the-screen-taking-off-my-hijab/>. Retrieved 25 February, 2012.

would make it easier for me not feel trapped in hijab if i would, that i had a option.i love hijab so much to me its like a warm hug from Allah(my quote).<sup>171</sup>

Her choice to wear hijab, though she claims to love it, is not without a tinge of loss. She writes that ‘i miss doing my hair which i was know for my crazy dos in high school’. Nevertheless, she claims that ‘its not worth it to me anymore’. Her loophole, the one day she gave herself, post-conversion, to go *hijab*-less, did not tempt her to return to the physical enactment of her earlier ideas about her identity.

*malaak-jayne*’s reckoning of time within the span of her own life, then, is closely related to her religious dress practices. People who have only known her since her conversion simply don’t recognise her. To those who had until recently only seen her without her *hijab*, her choice to not wear it does not seem like a big deal. Other people are less concerned than she is about her dress; it is *malaak-jayne* is the one who, since her conversion, has come to feel ‘naked’ without her *hijab*. This visceral reaction, in turn evokes the physical language - ‘hug’ - she uses to describe her ‘hajib’ playing in her relationship with Allah. Finally, she positions her story within her own lived experience:

humdeAllah i have been muslim for 7years now mashAllah but i will tell my children about this day. and please u can use my story too, to teach others!<sup>172</sup>

By referencing her ongoing commitment to being a Muslim, invoking the name of Allah in thanks of her conversion and repeating her reference to ‘this day’ (when she decided to go without her hijab and felt naked), ‘this day’ takes on what seems a disproportionately large importance in her narrating the history of her religious dress practice: after all, she only took off her *hijab* for a day. Nevertheless, it shows the centrality of her hair covering to her enactment of her newly Muslim self. Her suggestion that she chooses to narrate this event to prevent others from making the same choice and that she will tell her children about it, illustrates how such online enactments are part of building community and transmitting knowledge.

Similar enactments of the transformative power of religious dress are also explored in posts on Jewish blogs about what to expect when you convert and begin to dress differently. For instance,

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<sup>171</sup> <http://www.hijabtrendz.com/2010/03/30/behind-the-screen-taking-off-my-hijab/>. Retrieved 25 February 25, 2012.

<sup>172</sup> <http://www.hijabtrendz.com/2010/03/30/behind-the-screen-taking-off-my-hijab/>. Retrieved 25 February 25, 2012.



Kochava who blogs at *You're Not Crazy*, has a long list of what she has experienced since beginning to wear religious, modest, dress:

I've always been a jeans-and-t-shirts kind of girl. Very low maintenance. So much so that I didn't even know I have an obsessive compulsion to color-coordinate until my freshman year of college! Beginning to work in a professional field had partially ruined this tendency, but in April 2010, I switched full-time to knee-length or longer skirts and elbow-length sleeves or longer.<sup>173</sup>

The list she compiles about the changes she has experienced since changing into religious dress includes topics such as *Most Expected Hassle*, *Less of a Big Deal than Expected*, *Best Perk*, *Biggest Gripe*, as well as other, unexpected personal concerns. Some of these are about having to shave her legs more often, and others include how people treat her differently when she is wearing a skirt:

Both men and women open doors for me CONSTANTLY. Being a Southern belle, this doesn't bother me. And it gives me a chance to say thank you and smile at a stranger J I think it makes me a happier person, and also gives me a chance to brighten someone else's day with returned kindness.<sup>174</sup>

As well as being more self-confident, feeling pretty and enjoying making 'fashionable choices', all of which she describes as being unintended consequences of wearing religiously adherent modest dress. Such advice, although aimed at new *hijabis*, is also seen on Muslim blogs, where women who already wear the *hijab* offer advice about wearing it that is both spiritual and practical, often linked to consumption and shopping.<sup>175</sup>

### 3.12 Drawn to religious dress

Beyond these changes in how women enact their newly religious identities online after they have begun wearing religious dress, for some bloggers it appears that religious dress was been part of what attracted them to converting to Judaism or Islam. Admittedly, this phenomenon does not appear to be particularly widespread, and is not something that women blog about extensively. However, women for whom religious dress is a source of attraction to becoming newly or differently religious, are an illustrative anomaly of the complexity of choosing an alternative modernity which encompasses religion, gender roles and dress. For some of the Muslim bloggers and on some of the Muslim sites, religious dress is something they wear before conversion, beyond the one-off attempts encompassed by 'World Hijab Day'. Instead, bloggers such as *Cover(ed) Girl*

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<sup>173</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.com/2010/10/changing-from-jeans-and-t-shirts-to.html>. Retrieved 7 February, 2012.

<sup>174</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.com/2010/10/changing-from-jeans-and-t-shirts-to.html>. Retrieved 7 February, 2012.

<sup>175</sup> <http://www.withloveleena.com/my-hijab-story-and-advice/>. Retrieved 18 May, 2016.

had not converted to Islam when she began blogging, and does not explicitly state that she is going to do so. Her first post, *New around here!*, instead shows her looking for other women who share her experiences of dress:

I just created this account. I hope to have a chance to chat with other hijabis and niqabis, be they non-Muslim (like me) or Muslim.

I love wearing hijab and niqab! It's so comfortable. It's harder to find hijab-compliant clothes this time of year... It's hard in winter, too, since most jackets and long-sleeve tops seem to be sooo tight and/or (especially in the case of long-sleeve shirts) made of fabric that is see-through.<sup>176</sup>

While this is a slightly confusing set of concerns (why would her dress need to be 'hijab-compliant' if the affect of comfort is one of the reasons for wearing both *niqabs* and *hijabs*? ) *Cover(ed) Girl* is very clear in this post that she is not a Muslim. At this stage in her blog, her self-definition as a *hijabi*, while it appears to be informed by Muslim modesty rules is not, at this stage, done as part of Muslim religious practice. Her blog posts suggest that she is considering conversion, as in her second post, she pairs her reading of a book entitled *Daughters of Another Path* by Carol Anway (which she describes as 'very eye-opening') with a description of where and how she buys her *hijabs* and *niqabs* online, as well as giving her perspective on how they feel to wear, and whether or not they do well in the washing machine.

In fact, as this later post suggests, some converts may actually be drawn to religion because of the dress rules, rather than in spite of them:

My interest in religion began after I read a Spanish article on the condition of women in Islam, followed by an article from the same site on the hijab. I was intrigued by the concept of covering up for God, and that such covering was an exterior expression of an internal state of modesty and purity. The idea that covering up like that was not really encouraged until a woman had achieved this internal purity was also interesting, and ran counter to what I'd always heard about women being forced to cover by their husbands, fathers, and brothers (and that was if I heard anything about it at all). I had never thought about Islam or Muslims before. Though I knew virtually nothing about Islam, I knew that my dad's assertion that Muslims worshiped Muhammad (PBUH) and not God couldn't be right. Also, having come of age in post-9/11 America, I wanted to see for myself what all the fuss was about.<sup>177</sup>

She only begins to attend classes about Islam at her local mosque a few months after the first post; she describes herself as attending these in *niqab*. One of the comments on her blog suggests that wearing religious dress before, or without, converting is not unique to *Cover(ed) Girl*. The poster *caraboska*, who describes herself as a Protestant by choice (following a religious conversion when she was fifteen):

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<sup>176</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2009/06/new-around-here.html>. Retrieved September 30, 2017.

<sup>177</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/my-reasons-for-converting-to-islam-part.html>. Retrieved 18 May, 2016.

‘I’ve observed prayer times, fasted during Ramadan, read the Qur’an, worn hijab at home and even in public on a few occasions. I’ve even performed ablutions.’

‘.....You could say that engaging with Islamic customs (insofar as they do not conflict with the Bible) has been an experiment in separating 'cultural trappings' from 'the real deal'. I have tried out each custom to see what its meaning will be for me personally. The result is a religious practice that looks very different from that of the circles I travel in - both inside and out.’<sup>178</sup>

This gives some indication of the ethical and spiritual dimension of religious dress, even when (partially) divorced from the source religion, which does not appear to be a problem for *caraboska* or, originally, for *Cover(ed) Girl*. This suggests the possibility for wider interpretation of hybridity of religious practice, which will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. However, while *caraboska* remains Protestant (as far as can be judged from her comments), *Cover(ed) Girl* converts to Islam and continues enacting her religious practice through blogging until the middle of 2015, when she wrote that she had returned to ‘school’ and work and was therefore too busy to blog regularly.

While some of the commenters appear surprised that *Cover(ed) Girl* begins her conversion to Islam by being a non-Muslim *niqabi*, most of the comments are very supportive. Wearing religious dress before conversion, while not common, is thus not unique to *Cover(ed) Girl* and her readers. For instance, on *ilovehishmatheblog*, the blogger writes about her views of non-Muslim *hijabis*, suggesting they are at least sufficiently common for her to have frequently had to answer questions about wearing the *hijab* by women who are not Muslim:

Women who do not follow Islam as their religion but feel drawn towards hijab often ask me if we Muslims will feel disrespected by them wearing the hijab. No, we do not.<sup>179</sup>

*ilovehishmatheblog* describes how wearing religious dress helped her embrace Islam, and reject the sexualisation of women she associates with secular dress. This is followed by a description how she herself came to Islam. She proclaims that she herself was once a non-Muslim *hijabi*, and links this with a rejection of superficiality, commercialism and sexualisation of women.

Wearing religious dress can also be seen in a rejection of sexualisation and a complicated relationship with commercialism in blog posts by converts to Orthodox Judaism. The link between women wanting to be seen as more than sexual objects is sufficiently common for it to be covered on the satire blog *Frum Satire*, which, while not often directly included in my research, has formed a backdrop to much of it. Offering satirical critiques of Orthodox Judaism from an insider’s

<sup>178</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2009/08/islam-101.html>. Retrieved 18 May, 2016.

<sup>179</sup> <http://ilovehishmatheblog.blogspot.co.uk/2009/06/juma-thoughts-non-muslims-wearing-hijab.html>. Retrieved 14 October, 2015.

perspective, *Heshy*, the writer behind the site, argues that he can easily spot a BT, in a mildly misogynist post:

Girls becoming frum is an interesting progression, many of the girls I have watched drink the punch and take the plunge did it because they didn't want to be considered a sex object.<sup>180</sup>

He describes them as returning from Israel wearing skirts to their college campuses, and burning all their:

...untznius clothing, almost all of them regret it afterward, when they realize that tank tops can be worn over long sleeved shirts and pants can be worn depending on your observance level. Of course for all those ex-sluts those mini skirts and thigh high hooker boots may be a problem.

He argues that such enthusiasm for religious dress and religious practice through religious dress is mainly sustained by a local community. Otherwise, 'it usually ends by the time you realize that long sleeves in the summer don't work too well.' However, indicating the importance of changes in observance to online enactment, he also claims that some BT girls have multiple Facebook profiles, some from before they became more observant, and new ones that reflect their changed religious belonging.

While it has been difficult to find extensive evidence of Jewish examples equivalent to non-Muslim *hijabis*, *Kelsey*, a reporter, describes in an article how dressing modestly changed her life. She argues that it was part of what helped her cure her lingering body anxieties and the beginning of her eventual conversion to Orthodox Judaism.<sup>181</sup> She writes acknowledges that:

This might seem like a trivial stop on the way to an identity, but to me, it was transformative. Dressing as a religious woman gave me a chance to try on the persona, and I found, that to some extent, the persona fit.<sup>182</sup>

As an indication either of the importance of this story to her, or of the ongoing appeal of stories associated with women's dress, this blog post had previously been posted on *Refinery 29*,<sup>183</sup> an online magazine about fashion which sometimes features stories about modest dress.

While other Jewish bloggers are less explicit about the early use of religious dress in informing their new or changed religious identities, they do describe wanting to cover their hair, as in the case of *Kate* earlier in this chapter. It remains that women can be drawn to religion and

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<sup>180</sup> <http://www.frumsatire.net/2009/07/13/making-fun-of-baal-teshuva-girls/>. Retrieved 27 July, 2016.

<sup>181</sup> Osgood, Kelsey (2015). 'How Dressing Modestly Changed My Life'. *Matzav*. 8 July. <http://matzav.com/how-dressing-modestly-changed-my-life/>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

<sup>182</sup> Osgood, Kelsey (2015). 'How Dressing Modestly Changed My Life'. *Matzav*. 8 July. <http://matzav.com/how-dressing-modestly-changed-my-life/>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

<sup>183</sup> Osgood, Kelsey (2015). 'How Dressing Modestly Changed My Life'. *Refinery 29*. 7 July. <http://www.refinery29.com/orthodox-judaism-empowering-modest-clothing>. Retrieved 31 May, 2016.

observance because of religious dress, or at least the associated gender roles, not despite them. While this appears to be more common among converts to Islam than among Jewish converts, the reason for this difference is unclear. It may be related to factors such as the popularity of stories such as *Amanda's*, where wearing *hijab* was one of the factors that convinced her to convert,<sup>184</sup> rather than ones such as *Kelsey's* in Judaism, to the different emphases on conversions in the two religions. and how this might be related any differences in status afforded to converts in the two religions.

### 3.13 Teaching children to creatively conform

Teaching children to wear religious dress is potentially controversial, even within the context of women blogging about religious dress online. As discussed above, the association between religious dress and misogynist oppression is usually countered by an emphasis on personal choice. Using the language of 'choice' when it comes to children and religious dress, of course, more complicated. This tension does not prevent some bloggers, such as *Kazemah*, describing telling their daughters to wear religious dress,<sup>185</sup> although it is notable that her stepdaughter wears a *khimar* (keeping face uncovered) rather than the *niqab* that *Kazemah* herself wears.

However, most bloggers resolve this tension, between the narrative of personal choice as a legitimising of religious dress and the inherent power imbalance between parents and children, by emphasising their children are not forced to wear religious dress. Similarly, they acknowledge the association between modesty, choice and the sexualisation of girls bodies, by discussing the point in their children's lives when wearing religiously adherent dress is appropriate. For instance, *Chevonne*, the blogger who runs *Redefining Beauty Reflections*,<sup>186</sup> describes herself as having had 'romantic' ideas of how her daughter would begin to wear the hijab:

She would walk up to me one day after she hit puberty and say mommy I want to wear hijab. Then we would have a conversation about what it means and go hijab shopping. I've dreamt of her coming to me for hijab fashion advice and me (having magically acquiring the skills) fixing her hijab up in fabulous styles that rival the most acclaimed hijab stylist (Yes there is a such thing).<sup>187</sup>

However, *Chevonne* continues that despite her own enthusiasm for stylish religious dress, the *hijab* is not something that she wants to force on her daughter. Instead, in keeping with the occasionally

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<sup>184</sup> <http://www.hautehijab.com/blogs/hijab-fashion/15006353-an-american-hijabi-shares-her-story-part-ii-amandas-conversion-to-islam>. Retrieved 18 May, 2016.

<sup>185</sup> <https://kazemah.wordpress.com/2014/06/20/polygyny/#comments>. Retrieved 11 July, 2016.

<sup>186</sup> <http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/>. Retrieved 29 March, 2012.

<sup>187</sup> <http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/2009/08/baby-hijabis.html>. Retrieved 29 March, 2012.

seemingly inconsistent but functioning perspectives of religious dress and choice enacted through the blogs, she argues that she wants her child to want it:

I don't want to "train" her to wear hijab. I'm not opposed to strongly suggesting she think about dressing modestly. But I don't want to feel like I forced her into anything. I want her to do it, but I want it to come from her. To be a reflection of where she is spiritually, not a false representation of her iman. I want her to own it, love it, understand it etc etc etc.<sup>188</sup>

Perhaps surprising to a secular reader, *Chevonne* places the age at which she would feel her daughter was ready to make an informed choice about religious dress falls significantly before puberty (she mentions the age of four),

And before she is at the age of understanding her wearing hijab would simply be a reflection of what I want her to wear. That is not to say that if she is four and she wants to dress like mommy :-D I won't be like YAY!!! But let's make a full circle. Babies and hijab or even kids and hijab, how do you feel?<sup>189</sup>

Rather than approaching this as a 'sooner than better' question, these women describe wanting their children to make an informed choice to follow their own examples, when they are at an age when they understand what they are doing. Such a stance is demonstrated in one of the responses to *Chevonne's* post:

...I don,t believe it is necessary until puberty, and in addition to that I also feel that I want her to be fully aware of what it means. We live in a fairly white part of the uk with few hijabis and I want her to be strong enough to stand up to people who criticize her for wearing it. A friend of ours had to pull her 12 year old out of school because of bullying she experienced as the only hijabi in class.<sup>190</sup>

While there are some pressures from the religious community to, for instance, put a *hijab* on one of the blogger's babies, this does not seem to be suggestions that are taken very seriously, though of course accurately judging tone can be challenging in short posts. Similarly, wanting her daughter to enjoy Islam is a factor of why *Wood Turtle* occasionally allows her daughter to wear a *hijab*.

In addition, being concerned about when it is appropriate to pass on religious dress practices to one's daughters is a cross-religious phenomenon. Such concerns can be in reaction to the perceived standards of the bloggers' immediate offline religious community. Thus, *Orthomom* mentions that she was worried about her daughter embracing modest clothing 'too soon', as a trickle-down effect from religious influences at school. While such emphasis on children's modesty

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<sup>188</sup> <http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/2009/08/baby-hijabis.html>. Retrieved 29 March, 2012.

<sup>189</sup> <http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/2009/08/baby-hijabis.html>. Retrieved 29 March, 2012.

<sup>190</sup> <http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/2009/08/baby-hijabis.html>. Retrieved 29 March, 2012.

might be perceived as what is called a ‘humble brag’ on social media, the responses from the blogging mothers wondering what to do about it, ring true.<sup>191</sup> At the same time, the contrast between the clothing rules guiding secular society loom in the background,<sup>192</sup> but they are seen as a less immediate influence on the children’s clothing behaviour than those of more strict interpretations of modest dress guidelines, probably as a result of religious schooling and day camps. The internet, therefore, is a space where such concerns can be – anonymously – voiced and negotiated.

### 3.14 Conclusion

Blogging about religious dress is a way for women to enact their religious identities online. Often faced with prejudice and stereotyping from a media that they consider to unfairly and inaccurately represent them, writing is something that shows them to be different to their representations. The trope of agency is very prevalent, albeit an agency informed both by religious and communal concerns. While some of the bloggers identify as feminist, for from all of them do, but all wish to be seen as people who have given the subject of religious dress some thought. While there is often a call for other aspects of religious women’s lives to be taken into account, especially from Muslim women, having a position on or discussing religious dress, seems to be part of enacting a differently religious identity online – even when negating the need to focus on dress.

The material objects used, the wigs, the veils and the different forms of loose and female-gendered clothing are all part of constituting the religious subject, which is then further enacted through the act of writing in the subjective but oddly immaterial online identities created through blogs. Religious dress is both characterised by being an everyday reminder of religion, a signal to others, but also, more elusively, something which constitutes the religious self but does not define it. Importantly, it is mutable and changing – both in the lives of the communities, but also in the lives of the bloggers themselves. It can be both something they struggle with or embrace, with little linear narrative. Contradiction between the spiritual and the material is simply not a concern, as coherence is not required in the formation of lived religion – ‘even’ in conservative religions.

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<sup>191</sup> <http://www.orthomom.blogspot.com/2006/06/precocious-standards-of-modesty.html>. Retrieved March 28th, 2012.

<sup>192</sup> <http://www.orthomom.blogspot.com/2006/06/precocious-standards-of-modesty.html>. Retrieved March 28th, 2012.



## **4. Negotiating religious authority online: gendered practices and gendered spaces**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I interrogate Heidi Campbell's schema (2007) about different forms of religious authority online, in light of my primary research into how such authority is supported, challenged and constructed in the Muslim and Jewish women's blogging networks I study. Given the primacy of the online public sphere in general and blogs in particular to my research, how does the medium of blogs and the internet influence religious authority? The very useful examples of both Muslim and Jewish blogging about religious dress (such as Tarlo in Lewis, 2013), do not comprehensively discuss different forms of religious authority online. As I discussed in Chapter Three, the bloggers whose writing I study use the online space as an arena for enacting active, if not necessarily feminist, online religious identities, often through writing about religious dress. As shown by the use of comments, blogging is not done in isolation, or aimed entirely at an absent reader, but can also (depending on the popularity of the blog) include a loose network of other readers. Some such readers also surface once or more frequently as commenters, who may or may not be bloggers themselves.

An orthodox framework of religious practice can appear dominated by (male) religious authority. However, the bloggers whose writing I study are part of an internet-mediated dialogue with their own religious communities, with other secular or religious communities, with feminist ideas and online consumption. Therefore, I both look at what individual bloggers have written, and at what they might write and comment on others' blogs. Part of the aim of my research is to look beyond one-dimensional tropes about religiously dressed women, and the blogs I study contain much more than discussions about dress and religion. Hence, I widen the scope of the topics that the bloggers are writing about in in this chapter. Some of the examples, while drawn from the same blogs as in the previous chapters, do not directly reference religious dress. Nevertheless, the varying layers of authority at work in these networks inform and are part of how women enact their online religious identities, and gives an indication of the complex set of considerations that constitute the ethical agency of religious dress practices.



In the rapidly changing, online space, forms of authority are also likely to be evolving, which in turn requires analytical frameworks to be revisited and re-evaluated frequently. In this chapter, I use Campbell's (2007) article about religious authority online as a starting point for investigating the different forms of religious authority in the blogging networks I study. Such an evaluation benefits from considering online religious authority online through both a cross-religious and gendered perspectives. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a discussion of the usefulness and limitations of Campbell's schema as an approach to understanding the dynamics at work in the blogging networks I study. In doing so, I suggest that Campbell's gender-blind and mixed offline/online methodology needs refining or expanding to accommodate the results of my primary research. Campbell argues that 'the perception of authority varies across different religions traditions' (2007:1044). I have instead found that, while there is some variation between religions – such as Muslim bloggers being slightly more likely than Jewish bloggers to use religious texts when discussing religious dress – the similarities between how the bloggers of different religions approach and negotiate authority online are often greater than their differences. This is best exemplified by the importance of what Campbell describes as a personal, subjective authority on the blogs, both regarding religious texts and limiting the influence of (often male) trolls in the comments sections of the blogs.

Useful though Campbell's schema is, I also note that even within the forms of authority she describes, the approaches to, for instance, religious texts as a source of authority for religious practice have more facets than her work suggests. However, unlike the feminist and revisionist approaches to religious text suggested by, for instance Fatima Mernissi (2011), while bloggers might use a variety of both historical and textual approaches to religious texts, they do not necessarily come to revisionist conclusions about dress practices. Without overstating the implications of my research for the wider study of religion online, it points to areas of this rapidly expanding field that are in need of further investigation.

Therefore, without falling into technological determinism, my qualitative analysis of the primary sources suggests that it is worth considering the influence of the medium of blogs on how religious authority regarding dress practices operates online. I argue that these blogging networks are best understood as what Mia Lövhelm (2011) describes as women's self-governing ethical communities. Such online communities are not only shaped by but can also reinforce subjective but often conservative religious practices and beliefs. Consequently, I also draw on mediatization theories, discussed in Chapter One, to suggest that some aspects of how religious authority works

on the blogs is influenced by the medium – albeit without the secularising results often understood to be an inherent aspect of such theories. These can include diverse but internet-related sources of knowledge and authority, such as being a site of aggregation of other religiously dressed bloggers’ opinions or experiences, a knowledge of or response to religiously inspired memes, or being a trusted voice in a consumer landscape. Such forms of authority are not inherently secular. Instead, blogging about religious dress shows religious authority online to be multi-faceted, using and being influenced by contemporary tools as part of creating differently modern, gendered religious identities.

#### **4.2 Religious authority online – analytical framework**

In order to analyse how religious authority is enacted and negotiated on the blogs that form my primary sources, the implications of the term ‘authority’ requires clarification. As discussed, religious dress is at the intersection between religion, culture and fashion (Ahmed, 2011), which suggests that several different forms of authority would be at work when religious dress is negotiated online. Dress is also a highly gendered aspect to religious practice. Additionally, my research is focused on a space – the internet – where expression does not depend on being endorsed or supported by a religious hierarchy. Campbell (2007:1044) argues that, despite the rapidly growing body of work analysing how the internet can both threaten and affirm traditional religious structures, less attention has been paid to what religious authority online is composed of. Understanding the forms such authority takes is, for Campbell, a prerequisite for analysing whether or not authority is being undermined or upheld online. She therefore argues that a preliminary classification of the layers of religious authority online gives researchers more subtle ways of studying religion online.

As the basis for her preliminary layers of religious authority online, Campbell draws on Max Weber’s (1946) divisions between *legal*, *traditional* and *charismatic* authority, which in turn are the foundations of legitimacy. She also draws on primary research based on 21 interviewees, equally divided into three groups of Christians, Muslims and Jews. This relatively small sample have been interviewed both online and offline about their views of how religious authority works online. Campbell acknowledges the limitations of conclusions that can be drawn from such small sample sizes, and as discussed in Chapter Two, my sample is not significantly larger; just above 60 blogs. Additionally, Campbell notes that slight discrepancies in questions asked mean that a quantitative analysis was not feasible, which does not strike me as a major concern, given the ongoing value of both quantitative and qualitative responses to primary sources. Campbell’s later research into

religious authority in Christian communities (Campbell, 2010) addresses some of these issues by drawing on a larger sample size, and by doing a quantitative analysis of how authority is supported in Christian online writings. She is, admittedly, careful to position it as a preliminary study. The schema that Campbell uses from Weber is based on the transmission of authority, rather than on the end result. Even as she notes that religious authority necessarily contains another element of authority – divine legitimacy – Campbell argues that ‘religious authority still references systems, roles and personified beliefs as manifestations of authority’ (2007:1046). I agree that a similar focus on ways of transmission rather than on end results is an appropriate approach to studying religious authority online.

Campbell thus expands Weber’s concept of forms of authority to create a four-layered schema of religious authority online. These different layers are religious hierarchy, religious structures, religious ideology and religious text. Campbell describes religious hierarchy as the sort of authority that depends on the roles and perception of leaders. Despite the fact that some of the blogs list such sources of authority, for instance the website [chabad.org](http://chabad.org), as useful links for people considering conversion, I have found that the bloggers relatively rarely link directly to an online hierarchical religious authority in posts about dress. It does happen, such as on the blog *Tales of a Modern Hijabi*<sup>193</sup> mentioned in the previous chapter, or on *One Beauty of Islam* and *Amanda Q’s* blog which includes a link of helpful links about Islam.<sup>194</sup> Additionally, some of the Jewish bloggers similarly engage offline structures and link to them, though direct links between writing about religious hierarchical online structures is rarely direct. For instance, *SternGrad*, who blogs at *Life after Stern College*,<sup>195</sup> links to a range of online religious resources, such as [aish.com](http://aish.com), [Torah.org](http://Torah.org) and [onlinesiddur.com](http://onlinesiddur.com), which offers daily prayers. Although she also frequently links to materials from these sites, these links are less apparent in posts explicitly about dress, which instead reference her offline high school and articles she has read in her (admittedly religiously informed) college newsletter. The seeming limited linking directly to sites associated with traditional forms of religious structures, such as [isna.net](http://isna.net) or [chabad.org](http://chabad.org), is in spite of the fact that such sites usually combine the relevant passages from religious texts with either the perspective of a religious leader or a first person narrative offering an implicitly authoritative interpretation of the issue. Religious hierarchy is both challenged and upheld in a lot of the blogs I study. In an example from one of the

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<sup>193</sup> <https://allieliv.wordpress.com/>. Retrieved September 3rd, 2016.

<sup>194</sup> <http://1beautyofislam.blogspot.co.uk/p/bloggers-note.html>. Retrieved September 3rd, 2016.

<sup>195</sup> Stern College is the women’s college associated with Yeshiva University in New York, which combines a secular curriculum with Jewish studies. <http://www.yu.edu/stern/about/mission-history/>. Retrieved 28 September, 2016.

blogs I study, *The Salafi Feminist* both makes fun of her father, who she describes as a ‘grassroots imam’ for providing unsatisfying ‘typical imam answers’ to her concerns relating, for example, to women’s role in Islam,<sup>196</sup> but she also respects his religious authority. At the same time, she is open about the fact that accepting his religious knowledge and role as an imam does not prevent her from challenging him on many religious topics – or on blogging about the fact that she does so. She writes on her blog that he knows that she blogs about this, although he does not appear to publicly engage with her as a commenter. Similarly, *Talia at Star of Davida*, has blogged about attending the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) Unconference,<sup>197</sup> and interviews author Gila Manolson (2005) about their differing interpretations of modesty.<sup>198</sup> While she dresses according to her own understanding of *tzniut*, the links she recommends are mainly Orthodox Feminist ones, and she is not hesitant to lay the blame for street harassment at men, not immodestly dressed women,<sup>199</sup> and explains that being a feminist in a ‘patriarchal’ society<sup>200</sup> can be challenging. Hence, a combination of accepting and challenging areas of expertise from male religious leaders, especially about women’s roles and religious practice, is a common theme on many of the blogs.

Religious structures, in Campbell’s framework, include ‘community structures, patterns of practice and official organisations’, religious ideology is composed of ‘commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith or shared identity’ and religious texts are ‘recognised teachings or official religious books such as the Koran, Torah or Bible’ (2007:1048). Based on my research, religious texts appear to be a more complicated source of religious authority online than suggested by Campbell’s schema. I was initially surprised by the roundabout ways in which religious texts were used, or were simply alluded to, in the blog posts about religious dress. That they are often alluded to rather than cited explicitly, is possibly because of an assumption that readers will recognise the reference: an indication of the presumed audience of the blogs. There is also the possibility that quoting religious text is seen as a male and hierarchical way of arguing, despite some historical precedence in both

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<sup>196</sup> <http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.co.uk/2016/06/to-be-my-fathers-daughter.html>. Retrieved July 20th, 2016.

<sup>197</sup> <http://starofdavida.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/blogging-jofa-unconference-conversion.html>, Retrieved 15 September, 2016.

<sup>198</sup> <http://starofdavida.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/star-of-davida-interviews-gila-manolson.html>. Retrieved 15 September, 2016.

<sup>199</sup> <http://starofdavida.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/tzniut-and-street-harassment.html> Retrieved 15 September, 2016.

<sup>200</sup> <http://starofdavida.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/an-orthodox-feminist-takes-on-college.html>, though it is unclear if she is describing all of American society, or only her immediate Orthodox community, as ‘patriarchal’. Retrieved 28 September, 2016.

parts of both the religious traditions of women being venerated as being knowledgeable about religious texts.<sup>201</sup>

When religious texts are used on the blogs I study, it is sometimes ‘just’ as a source of inspiration, where bloggers might post *suras* from the Quran during Ramadan. Otherwise, the interpretation of religious texts is presented by women bloggers as something they do themselves, albeit within a framework which they themselves define as ‘orthodox’ or ‘observant’. Scholars such as Mernissi (2011) have used personalised approaches to revisionist readings of religious texts as the basis for feminist activism, which often relies on the discovery of discrepancies between oral and written traditions, as a way of formulating argument for why religious dress is not necessary for practising Muslim women. Drawing firm conclusions about trends in the blogosphere is challenging, given the ongoing flux and change enacted on the blogs. However, while I have found that the Muslim bloggers tend to be more comfortable with quoting religious texts than the Jewish bloggers, while some bloggers quote or link to the *Hadith* literature, they tend to be much more comfortable with the Quran than with the *Hadith*. Such differing levels of comfort between writing that they ‘love’ the Quran and a critical stance toward the *Hadith*, can be, for example, ascribed to one blogger, *Cover(Ed) Girl*, practising a ‘Quran Only’ interpretation of the Islam. For others, it seems more closely aligned with a personalised reading of the religious texts, possibly but not necessarily informed by feminist scholars. Therefore, while my investigation of how Jewish and Muslim women bloggers use religious texts when writing about modest dress gives further nuance to Campbell’s (2007) category of religious textual authority (by arguing that while not all religious texts are given equal weight in these networks), it does not necessarily mean that the bloggers conclude that religious dress is not a requirement.

Given the importance of the ephemeral materiality to how religious identities are enacted on these blogs, one of my main methodological concerns is that Campbell approaches interviewees from the different religious traditions in different ways. For instance, her Christian interviewees are all drawn from an online community. By contrast, the Muslim interviewees are interviewed offline and drawn from students at Al Qasemi College, an institute for Sharia and Islamic studies based in

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<sup>201</sup>For instance, the Prophet’s wife Aisha bint abi Bakr, who is noted in Sunni Islam for both her role in early Islamic history and a noted expert on *Hadith* (Elsadda, 2001:37). While Aisha and other women among the early Muslim community are widely used as role models for behaviour and inspiration (see for instance Small Salhi, 2001:118), some scholars have argued that, while women did transmit *Hadith*, there is need for caution in considering such actions as proto-feminist, and that they should instead be understood within their historical contexts (Sayeed, 2009:150).

Israel, meaning that they have a regular association with an offline religious community. Similarly, the Jewish interviewees are university students studying in Israel, who are interviewed offline about what they think about religious online authority. While Campbell acknowledges these differences in her methodology section, it does not surface as a consideration for why there appear to be significant differences between how practitioners from different religious traditions view religious authority online.

Without over-stating the differences between our results, I suggest that, based on the similarities and differences in our results, such methodological choices may have influenced the outcome of Campbell's research. The Christians included in Campbell's study, all of whom – like all of my primary sources – were drawn from an online community, showed that all four sorts of religious authority online were ones that they took into consideration. For them, the internet both supported and challenged religious structures, hierarchies and texts as forms of religious authority. This resulted in an online community 'that is based on perceived relationships and personal connections more than on official affiliations' (Campbell 2007:1051), changing the focus of the Christian communities to emphasise a global rather than local perspective. Such a result seems very similar to mine, despite the sectarian differences between our sources.

By contrast, Campbell found that the Muslims, who she drew from offline communities and interviewed offline, emphasised their dependence on religious texts as a source of authority, with particular emphasis on the Quran. They also mention the hierarchical authority of particular preachers as an important sources of religious authority. This differs slightly from how such forms of authority works on the blogs I study. The Muslim bloggers whose work I study are not always, based on what they write, embedded in offline religious communities. When they are, they describe challenging what they regard as the status quo in the offline religious communities. Such challenges of authority do not necessarily extend to their religious dress practices: accepting different forms of authority on one subject at one point in time does not mean accepting all forms of authority about all subjects all the time. That the Christians in Campbell's study appear to find more support online and be more challenging of religious structures than what Campbell describes as Muslim or Jewish responses to online religious authority, may have more to do with the ways in which online communities versus offline communities operate than to do with differences between religions.

Even though the differences between mine and Campbell's results may be attributable to other variables (for example differences in attitudes between people in the United States versus the

Middle East, for example), it points to the need for an increased sensitivity to the variations and similarities of behaviours in online and offline contexts when doing data collection for studying online religious practices. While I recognise the wealth of information and material that would have been available had I chosen to interview the women in question, or made inquiries about their offline lives, the focus of this project is in self-generated texts readily available in an online public sphere. Additionally, the pervasive finding of my research is that many of these bloggers turn to the online space both as a creative outlet and as a source of support where they negotiate religious practices and beliefs. As many of the women bloggers express that they find religious community online, studying how authority is enacted in online communities on its own terms is a valid contribution to the field.

Another methodological consideration is that Campbell's 2007 article does not use gender as an analytical category, while it is highly relevant to my research that I study a community of women, rather than of men. As Campbell does not mention the gender of the people she has interviewed, or the subjects that she has asked them about, it is impossible to determine whether or not gender has been a factor in what forms of authority they consider appropriate to draw from the internet. Campbell finds that her Jewish interviewees are more comfortable emphasising community as a sources of religious authority than they are with using religious texts. This is closely in line with my results for *both* Jewish and Muslim women bloggers. Modifying the gender-blindness of Campbell's schema of authority online might be useful. Lövheim's 2016 article emphasises how conventionally feminine forms of communication may indeed prove to be unusually well-suited to the online space, which modifies the seeming gender blindness of Campbell's suggestions of authority. Positioning religious resurgence online as a personalised and contextualised form of social interaction (Lövheim, 2016:25), gender is not only shaped by, but shapes, the 'various outcomes of mediatisation'. It is not simply that different forms of authority matter, but also that it might be more socially acceptable to have one sort of authority online if you are a woman than if you are a man.

Some areas of religious practice are drawn from a combination of forms of authority that are highly gendered offline as well as online. Dress may prove to be one such area of practice. For instance, Ayala Fader's research into (offline) Hasidic Jewish communities in Boro Park argues that, in the communities she studies, that although:

Hasidic men make the official rulings on women's modest behaviour and dress, Hasidic women interpret the possible variations in modesty by enforcing particular stances that a family or institution will take. (2009:152)

Despite the roles of male religious leaders in interpreting texts and leading religious structures through their privileged positions in offline religious structures, women's religious dress may be less obviously linked to the male-dominated, hierarchical authorities than matters such as mosque attendance or *agunah* activism might be (Zion-Waldoks, 2015), as the latter two are more clearly included in a public religious sphere. The inclusion of men in modesty rules, especially pertaining to behaviours if not explicitly to dress, is used not only as a way of arguing that modesty rules ascribe different but equal roles for men and women, but is also used as a riposte against men who try to exert online authority about what women should or should not be wearing. The role of men in influencing women's dress online is therefore far from uncontroversial, and an area ripe for mockery.<sup>202</sup> Online attempts by male commenters or bloggers to exert authority about matters regarding women's religious dress, are actively challenged and often rejected by the women bloggers. This is especially true when such attempts are interpreted as 'trolling', where people post incendiary comments to deliberately provoke a response from the original poster or from an online community. While outwardly conforming to conservative interpretations of gender roles and religious texts, religious dress is consistently described as something which should primarily be an expression and reinforcement of one's religious beliefs, rather than result from external pressures. This is even the case when external pressures are described as being present, or when the bloggers themselves appear to be exerting such pressure on other women, enacted through describing themselves as being uncomfortable with other women being immodestly dressed. Consequently, and importantly, being male does not equate to having higher status or more authority in these blogging networks.

Rather than exclusively depending on hierarchical religious structures, which in these cases would be overwhelmingly male, I argue that women who blog about religious dress approach religious authority in a personal but public way – often in dialogue with other bloggers. The conservative bent of such ethical communities (Lövheim, 2011), informs new sorts of authority – ones derived from the skill-sets relevant to the medium, rather than necessarily ones drawn from other offline structures. These blogging networks appear to be largely self-governing online communities where personal authority and talent for written expression drawn from first person

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<sup>202</sup> <http://muslimgirl.net/9663/official-fatwa-mens-hijab/>. Retrieved 16 September, 2015.



experiences are of paramount importance – albeit within a context that the women themselves describe as religiously observant. As a result, Lövheim (2016) argues for bringing to the forefront combinations of personalised use and financing models in digital media that encourage ‘sharing’, ‘liking’ and ‘clicking’, while admitting that these may simultaneously destabilise religious hierarchies and orthodoxies as well as reinforce conservative forms of behaviour and interpretation. Such a seeming contradiction appears to be in line with the lack of a need for coherence as part of enacting reality, even within a framework that is ostensibly Orthodox, which is accounted for by the concept of ‘enactment’ discussed in Chapter Three. As discussed in Chapter One, Birgit Meyer argues that we should be using what she dubs ‘mediation’ as a theoretical starting point for understanding of how media can be understood to have a ‘formative’ role as a ‘constitutive part of religion’ (Meyer, 2013:13). Meyer, referencing Van de Port (2011), argues that mediation adheres to a ‘postmodern logic’ where ‘reality is not supposed to lie beyond representation, but to be constituted by it’ (2013:6), a position very similar to Annemarie Mol’s concept of enactment which I discussed in Chapter Three. As a result, Meyer argues, religion is not weakened by the proliferation of diverse media forms. A benefit of mediation theory for my research is that it combines the turn to lived religion within religious studies and concomitant search for ‘authentic’ religious experience, with an understanding of the important influence that the online sphere brings to such developments.

#### **4.3 Religious texts as sources of authority**

Given that blogs have long been a textual medium, and that both Judaism and Islam are religions which place importance on the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts, I initially thought the bloggers would depend more on religious texts as a sources of authority than they do. I expected to see personal interpretations of relevant sections of the Quran or the Torah to feature heavily in discussions about religious dress. Admittedly, in line with Mernissi’s approach to textual re-interpretation, many express discomfort with elements of the oral and cultural traditions, which suggests a need to modify Campbell’s understanding of religious textual authority. Criticising the *Hadith* literature, or feeling challenged by certain elements of *tzniut*, appears to be considered more socially acceptable in the online communities I study than questioning the Torah or Quran. Personal and subjective uses of texts can, but do not have to, lead to less conservative or strict interpretations of religious dress rules.

However, religious texts are often alluded to rather than explicitly cited and discussed. These oblique references may stem from a discomfort with establishing oneself as an interpreter of

the religious text, an action associated with religious hierarchical expertise. The relative rarity of direct textual reference or interpretation does not necessarily decrease the religious authority with which the texts are imbued. When they are alluded to on the blogs, religious texts are used as a source of authority. However, such authority is not prescriptive. When texts are used, they are situated within a personal context as part of meaning making, either supporting or challenging conservative dress practices, or provided as fodder for answering questions about religious dress. Importantly, religious textual authority is not siloed away from other forms of religious authority online. Other aspects of online engagement and commentary are often used in support when religious textual authority is used online.

#### 4.3.1 How are religious texts used on the Jewish blogs?

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, one of the similarities between mine and Campbell's findings about religious authority online is that religious texts appear to be more important to the Muslim bloggers whose writing I have studied, than they are to the Jewish ones. Nevertheless, given the obvious interest in discussion of religious texts in the earlier incarnations of the Jewish blogosphere,<sup>203</sup> I was surprised by the limited evidence of drawing on religious texts as a source of religious authority in the blogs. Even when texts are explicitly used a form of religious authority, as in this example from *Kvetching Editor* about the meaning of modesty in her life, texts are used together other forms of authority, rather than in isolation. As part of a series called *Ask Chaviva anything* (a title drawn from longstanding webforum Reddit's 'Ask Me Anything' subforum).<sup>204</sup> Having begun by linking to what she has written about *tzniut* on her blog before, as well as to her *Tzniut Project* series (which I will discuss later in this chapter), she responds to questions about how she defines *tzniut* with a section that she tells her readers she copied and pasted from the *Tzniut Project*. She includes links to those sections to allow readers to read more about 'her take on *tzniut*'. In the section that she copies, she seems to be clearly basing her religious dress in her

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<sup>203</sup>As discussed in, for instance, Kustanovitz, Esther D. (2006). 'In the blog-inning: Jewish Blogging 101'. *Contact*. Spring. Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, NY. 11-12. [http://web.archive.org/web/20060619003801/http://jewishlife.org:80/pdf/spring\\_2006.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20060619003801/http://jewishlife.org:80/pdf/spring_2006.pdf). Retrieved August 1st, 2016.

<sup>204</sup>Reddit, founded in 2005, is a website that includes messages boards, social media and allows uploading original content. 'Company Overview of Reddit Inc.' *Bloomberg*. <http://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp?privcapId=29927936>. Retrieved 20 September 2016. According to journalists such as Alexis Madrigal, the Ask Me Anything subreddit has become a new form of media (since its inception in 2008) thanks to the informal line of questioning the format permits and the range of respondents and inquirers. See for example: Madrigal, Alexis (2014). 'AMA: How a Weird Internet Thing Became a Mainstream Delight'. *The Atlantic*. 7 January. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/01/ama-how-a-weird-internet-thing-became-a-mainstream-delight/282860/>. Retrieved 26 July 26, 2016. Given its longevity, high levels of traffic, and association with high-profile internet figures such as Aaron Swartz (Watercutter, Angela (2014). 'New Aaron Swartz Documentary Continues his Crusade for Digital Freedom'. *Wired*. 28 January. <https://www.wired.com/2014/01/aaron-swartz-documentary-2/>. Retrieved 28 September 2016.), it is surprising that neither have attracted much explicit academic interest. What appears to be the only longitudinal study of Reddit (Singer, 2014) shows a great depth of knowledge of the forum, but does not focus on the influence that Reddit has had on other aspects of internet cultures.

readings of religious texts. Questions about the meaning of practice are here answered by referring to the authority of religious texts:

For me, the first thing I think of is, "Where does it come from? What does it mean? Why do we do it?" I suppose it's only natural that I'm plagued with questions from square one. It's easy for me to explain to people why we cover our hair (the sotah portion) and why we cover as much or as little as we do. But when it comes to clothing and speech and thought, it's a lot harder. As many others have said, it's a type of lifestyle, but lifestyle sounds too much like choice to me, and for me, yes I choose to do it, but the outline of what's to be done is less of a choice. Tzniut means more than modesty, it means living your life in a way that others wish to emulate. Making your modest clothes look beautiful, to emanate inner beauty, to carry yourself in thought and speech in a way that others say "Wow, if that's what tzniut is, then count me in." It's being a light, really, unto all people. It's being humbled before HaShem and all that's been provided us.

From Micah 6:8:

הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה יי דורש ממך כי אם עשות משפט ואהבת חסד והצנע לכת עם יי

HaShem told you what is good and what is required of you: do justly, love mercy (loving-kindness), and walk humbly (modestly) with HaShem.

The word used -- הצנע (ha'tznea) -- is the same word/root for tzniut. So, basically HaShem is saying "Walk this way."<sup>205</sup>

While the questions she raises are distinctly personal, the authority of religious texts appears to lie at the centre of how *Chaviva* describes her dress practices. She refuses to settle for the more superficial description 'lifestyle', which would most closely map onto 'religious ideology'. Instead she justifies her understanding of what modesty means in her life through rooting it in her reading of the Torah. When I began my research into uses of religious text online, this was what I expected to find: a personal response to religious text, which justifies conservative or Orthodox interpretations of religious dress.

Beyond personal responses, some of the Jewish bloggers turn to the comments section to clarify aspects of religious dress they do not understand. By turning to their online networks in this way, bloggers can also compensate for lacking access to offline resources – such as expensive or rare religious texts – that they need to find out more about the context of other things they have read. For example, *Kochava* at *You're Not Crazy*, has a blog post entitled *Halachic Discussion: Is*

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<sup>205</sup> <http://mamaloshen.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/ask-chaviva-anything-zionism-and-non.html>. Retrieved 26 July, 2016.

*Red an Immodest Color for Women?*<sup>206</sup> about whether or not Orthodox Jews should wear red. She begins her blog post by writing that ‘I was reading *Halichos Bas Yisrael* and came across an interesting point: "Bright red clothing is considered immodest.”’ *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, is a women’s guide to Judaism, written by rabbi Yitchak Yaacov Fuchs. *Kochava* follows this quote by noting that her reading of the text sees bright red clothing paired with tight-fitted clothing as something to be avoided, an indication that religious ideology and religious texts are overlapping forms of authority offline as well as online. She also notes that she had previously only heard this concern about colour of dress from very conservative communities, and that she herself loves bright colours. The religious text cited the basis for this decision is drawn from the Talmud, namely *Shulchan Aruch*, Yoreh De’ah 178:1, and is buttressed by mentions of twelfth century rabbi Rashi’s commentary on Bereshit/Genesis 49:11. (*Kochava* includes both the Hebrew and English names of the book, although Bereshit is transcribed into English rather than written in Hebrew). Perhaps surprisingly, *Kochava* does not criticise the contents of the book as a source of textual religious authority, which include mentions of skirt length and that girls should be wearing modest dress from the age of three (Yafeh, 2007:526). She does, however, want to find out more about the justification for not wearing red. As she is not herself able to access the *Shulchan Aruch*, the condensed version of the Talmud cited in the *Halichos bas Israel*, *Kochava* asks the people in ‘Lurker Land’ about their views on whether or not she can wear red.

The responses from *Kochava*’s online network draw on varying sources of religious authority. One commenter spoken to the *rebbetzin* (rabbi’s wife) in her community, the person who would historically be required to give opinions about women’s dress and lead by example. In a more surprising personal source of authority, another (male) commenter links to scientific studies about the sexual implications of red. He adds that these:

...lead me to suspect that the rabbi's knew something was going on. In short, Red makes men look more powerful and romantic, and it makes women more attractive and sexually desirable.<sup>207</sup>

Such using of science as to endorse a conservative rabbinical standpoint does not, however, seem to be considered problematic by the other posters, who instead thank him for such interesting links.

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<sup>206</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/halachic-discussion-is-red-immodest.html>. Retrieved 1 August, 2016.

<sup>207</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/halachic-discussion-is-red-immodest.html>. Retrieved 1 August, 2016.

Online, therefore, many different sources of authority can be deemed relevant to supporting conservative positions regarding, for example, religious dress.

A willingness to include multiple sources of textual authority and knowledge are reflected in other comments as well. One of the commenters, *Chaviva* (also the blogger behind *Kvetching Editor*), engages with the sort of textual critique that I would have expected, when she posts that:

Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 178:1 simply condemns taking on the practices of gentiles and idolators. I'm guessing that it was a common practice to wear red among the unsavory types ... thus, forbidden.<sup>208</sup>

However, similarly to the commenter who drew on scientific studies to argue about the attractive element of the colour red, *Chaviva* expands on this statement first by drawing on evidence from outside of rabbinic Judaism, by adding that 'Red has always been a questionable color, though. Think about the Scarlet Letter.' (She appears to be alluding to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel from 1850, set in seventeenth century Puritan Boston, where the female protagonist Hester Prynne is publicly punished for adultery through having to wear the eponymous scarlet letter.) However, even though *Chaviva* argues that the passage from the *Shulhan Aruch* does not explicitly ban the wearing of red, that you are not to copy the ways of idolators, and that the text may indeed stem from the idea that those who wore red were not worth copying, she also notes that Jews are happy to wear a red string. Her last statement is followed by a smiley face (':)'), suggesting that she is lightly mocking this seeming inconsistency. Thus, in this loose online network, even comments specifically about religious are shown to draw on various forms of authority, from both religious and secular sources.

The many forms of authority at work in online religious communities are displayed throughout the comments section for this post, which is quite typical of how the many different forms of authority work online. Rather than engaging with the religious texts in the direct way that *Kochava* seems to be requesting, other commenters note that they have been told not to wear red by their rabbi, or that they do and that it depends on what the mores are within your community. Despite the request from one of the commenters that they arrive at a final idea of whether or not wearing red can be considered modest, no such conclusion solidifies. Beyond the consideration that none of the commenters and *Kochava* herself appear to be rabbis, making a decision based on interpretation of text a sensitive matter, the lack of a final conclusion seems apt, given the focus on

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<sup>208</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/halachic-discussion-is-red-immodest.html>. Retrieved 1 August, 2016.

re-interpretation rather than finality inherent in both Jewish approaches to religious text in general and of blogs in particular. Indeed, one of the other blogs has a post titled ‘*How do we know this is a Jewish blog?*’<sup>209</sup> where the blogger jokingly responds to her own question by writing ‘Why else would there only be questions and no answers on this blog?’ This lack of finality is also, as I will discuss below, something that surfaces on the Muslim blogs, suggesting that it is a characteristic both of how religious authority and gendered religious identities are enacted online.

#### 4.3.2 Religious texts and revisionist conclusions – or not

Admittedly, some bloggers invoke and challenge religious textual authority in exactly the way that one would expect from combining Campbell’s and Mernissi’s analytical approaches to the use of texts and religious authority; reaching revisionist conclusions about religious dress online. For example, *Nahida*, who blogs as *The Fatal Feminist*, is a blogger who enthusiastically engages with religious texts (both the Quran and the *sunnah*) online – often, as the name of her blog suggests, through a feminist lens.<sup>210</sup> Nevertheless, she begins her blog post *On whether the hijab is mandatory* by explaining that she has deliberately avoiding writing about the *hijab* for many years. Now, however, she writes that she feels she has to do so in part because of comments on previous blog post of hers about how men need to stop asking her about her religious dress.<sup>211</sup> She has previously alluded to the Quran in broad terms, arguing that it encourages men to not look at her hair, as opposed to containing instructions for her to cover it, using the common narrative trope of modesty being a shared responsibility for men and women. In her post *On whether the hijab is mandatory*, she argues wearing a headscarf can be of value but is not a requirement in Islam. In the blog post *On whether the hijab is mandatory*, *Nahida* does not only explain that she has not wanted to write it, but goes to mock men who use *sura* 24:31 as the justification for why women should cover their hair:

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms.<sup>212</sup>

*Nahida*’s argument against using this verse to justify wearing religious dress includes the argument that men interpreting the verse have misunderstood its meaning. She states that:

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<sup>209</sup> <https://tuxeliana.wordpress.com/2014/04/01/how-do-we-know-this-is-a-jewish-blog/>. Retrieved 16 May, 2016.

<sup>210</sup> <https://thefatalfeminist.com/quranic-verses-and-misconceptions/>. Retrieved 14 September, 2016.

<sup>211</sup> <https://thefatalfeminist.com/2011/01/25/islam-headscarves-and-men-who-need-to-see-their-way-out/>. Retrieved 5 June, 2016.

<sup>212</sup> <https://thefatalfeminist.com/2014/11/12/on-whether-the-hijab-is-mandatory/>. Retrieved 5 June, 2016.

The area where male scholarship is wrong, however, is in arguing that the veil was already used to cover the hair, and that 24:31 merely commands the inclusion of the bosom *with* the hair, thus advising that both the hair and bosom are covered.<sup>213</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter One, this *sura* is frequently cited as the textual foundation for Muslim religious dress. Notably, *Nahida* emphasises that (what she considers to be incorrect) exegesis of the text is done by men – their gender is associated with lack of understanding of the text, which she goes on to analyse herself. In a slightly confusing exegesis, she also draws on another blogger's example about the pre-Islamic uses of dress to explain that the relevant verse is aimed at women covering their chests in order to be visibly different from non-Muslim women. Therefore, this would undermine excuses by Muslim men that Muslim women could be harassed publicly (in the ways that slave women could, for example).

Despite the slight lack of clarity in the details of her argument, *Nahida's* blog post reads as an illustration of how textual re-interpretation in Mernissi's framework might work online, as well as using religious texts and interpretation as a further form of authority when other, ideological forms of authority have only had limited success in making the argument that she does not consider *hijab* to be a requirement for a practising Muslim woman. *Nahida* has openly discussed that she only wears the *hijab* to pray,<sup>214</sup> but that this may change, depending on the state of her relationship with her religious practice. Within the context of her blogging and online network, support of *Nahida's* authority as an interpreter of texts is at the forefront of many of the comments. For instance, one comment is from a young girl who asks *Nahida* about how she should to explain to her parents that she does not want to wear the *hijab*. Her use of religious text may, therefore, be done in the way expected from reading Mernissi, but online, much of her authority also appears to stem from being combined with other layers of religious authority – not least among them, the way she enacts her personal experiences through writing.

Taking a personal approach to religious texts does not, however, necessarily lead to a rejection of religious dress – and authority attributed to one sort of religious text does not necessarily extend to all religious texts. For instance, the blogger *Cover(ed) Girl* expresses very strong sentiments rejecting the *Hadith* literature as a source of religious authority. She considers these religious texts, and their influences on religious ideologies, as sources of many of the problems both inside and outside the global Muslim community:

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<sup>213</sup> <https://thefatalefeminist.com/2014/11/12/on-whether-the-hijab-is-mandatory/>. Retrieved 5 June, 2016.

<sup>214</sup> <https://thefatalefeminist.com/2011/08/16/why-dont-you-wear-hijab/>. Retrieved 5 June, 2016.



The hadith, quite frankly, make me angry. They ensure that Muslims are seen all over the world as backward, primitive, tribal people who see women as property and merely the outlets for mens' sexual urges. They're why people think Muhammad married and had sex with a child and why they think he murdered or ordered the murders of those who opposed him. They're why so many Muslims take pagan superstitions (against black dogs, photos of living things, etc) as religious edict instead of the cultural baggage that they really are.<sup>215</sup>

All religious texts are, therefore, not created equal for her. However, rather than being a feminist Muslim in the mould suggested by Mernissi who rejects religious dress based on challenging problematic *Hadith*, *Cover(ed) Girl* discusses wearing both the *hijab* and *niqab*. Surprisingly, given the centrality of *hijab* to her religious practice, her blog posts about *hijab* do not tend to include religious texts at all, but instead are either light-hearted musings about it, such as the blog post *Hello, I'm Your Hijab*, (written from the perspective of a headscarf),<sup>216</sup> offer practical or fashion advice and questions, or ask the community for advice about how to break the news about her wearing the *hijab* to her family.<sup>217</sup> Here, she draws on practical, lived advice from her online network, rather than on religious texts as part of supporting her in daily challenges. However, such an approach to the *Hadith* literature does not mean that *Cover(ed) Girl* rejects religious dress, which Mernissi would argue to be drawn from the *Hadith* literature and culture rather than the Quran itself. Instead, as mentioned in the previous chapter, she was in part drawn to converting to Islam through reading about *hijab*, and while critical of the treatment of converts in her local community,<sup>218</sup> she remains committed to this part of her religious practice.

She is also explicitly a 'Quran Alone' Muslim, a movement associated with Islamic Modernism.<sup>219</sup> Her writing about rejecting the *Hadith* and offline religious hierarchical authorities ('scholars') is categorical. However, *Cover(ed) Girl's* resistance to *Hadith* should not be interpreted as a dismissal of all religious texts. As suggested by the commenter, she in fact deliberately builds her religious practice around the Quran, with several blog posts citing listing Quranic verses that she is studying, especially during Ramadan. Thus, she rejects much of hierarchical and structural authority in part because there are parts of their textual authority that she disagrees with. She does not only attribute the problems between Muslims and non-Muslims and Muslim superstition to the

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<sup>215</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/the-bible-quran-and-hadith.html>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>216</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/hello-im-your-hijab.html>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>217</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/07/families-convertsnon-muslims-and.html>. Retrieved 7 July, 2016.

<sup>218</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/going-it-alone.html>

<sup>219</sup> This is not only mentioned in her blog posts, but also signalled through her membership in the 'Quranists Network': <http://www.quranists.net/>. Retrieved 22 June, 2016.



*Hadith*, but she also adds that the hierarchy which she associates with certain kinds of religious texts is in itself something that gets in the way of being close to Allah and to independent thought:

Even lifelong Muslims can't see the Qur'an for the hadith, because their perceptions have been warped and dictated by scholars their entire lives. They've been brainwashed to think that Allah isn't enough, that the Qur'an Alone isn't enough, that you can't think for yourself in matters of religion because you "aren't a scholar" and "don't have the right education" for it, and that we need more than that to believe, live, and die as Muslims.<sup>220</sup>

*Cover(ed) Girl's* approach to religious texts garners limited, but positive, responses in the comments section. One commenter says 'Thanks for sharing this. I believe you are the only Quran-only Muslim I know so I enjoy your perspective.' Another shares *Cover(ed) Girl's* interpretation about the limited value of the *Hadith* literature in her life, writing that 'I absolutely, 100% agree with your views on hadiths. I also wrote a blog entry going off about hadiths. It's absolutely infuriating to argue and have to defend yourself constantly to hadith-followers.' A third, anonymous commenter replies less formally, but supportively, that 'you are truly guided love you :D'. *Cover(ed) Girl* thus depends on some forms of religious textual authority, and offers what commenters describes as being an interesting perspective on matters of, for example, religious dress.

Additionally, discomfort with the *Hadith* literature as a source of religious textual authority is far from limited to Quranist Muslims like *Cover(ed) Girl*. *Wood Turtle* expresses irritation with *imams* who she thinks depend too heavily on *Hadith* (even as she herself alludes to parts of the *Sunnah* in order to make arguments about mosque attendance). This is far from an unusual position, as suggested by responses to *Nahida's* (who runs *The Fatal Feminist*) guest post<sup>221</sup> on *Wood Turtle's* blog, where *Nahida* discusses how she responds to men questioning her religious practice). For instance, in commenting on *Nahida's* post, *QAtheworld*, one of the other bloggers in the network, writes that:

You remind me how glad I should be that I learned about Islam from the Qur'an itself before having a lot of contact other muslims. At the time, I lamented that fact to some extent. I never dreamed at that time how far from the original practice some people are today! I'm currently trying to address some of these issues at my own local masjid, but I wish I could write as eloquently as you do about such things. Yes, if you look at the Qur'an and hadiths you realize that no, "muslim" men do not seek to oppress women so much as MEN in

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<sup>220</sup> <http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/the-bible-quran-and-hadith.html>. Retrieved 2 September, 2016.

<sup>221</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/guest-post-the-right-of-the-inquiring-feminine/>. Retrieved 28 July, 2016.

general seek to oppress and exclude women, and Islam addresses this very fact over and over.<sup>222</sup>

Here, *QAtheworld* appears to accept both the Quran and *Hadith* as sources of authority, and ones that are more important to her than the approval or disapproval of her community, suggesting that she rejects at least the authority from her local religious ideology. However, *QAtheworld's* comment is understood by *Wood Turtle* as a criticism of the *Hadith*. She responds to *QAtheworld's* comment with a reference to owing her an email, suggesting that their communication is more frequent than simply commenting on each other's blogs. She then adds:

I remember the exact moment when I was "told" that Hadith needed to inform my religion. It came directly after a conversation about how it's haraam to pluck eyebrows. I remember feeling betrayed and the idea that the words of a man took precedence over the words of God was alien to my newly converted brain (this was before I truly loved the Prophet.. But that's another story).<sup>223</sup>

*Wood Turtle's* comment emphasises the social acceptability in this online network of being uncomfortable with some religious texts as sources of authority, while whole-heartedly embracing another.

These differing levels of comfort with religious texts is not only something that eludes Campbell's schema, but might seem odd to other commenters. For instance, one commenter, a British Christian blogger called *glo* who often references including Muslim practices such as fasting for Ramadan,<sup>224</sup> asks:

But the stories you tell about the prophet in your post ARE from Hadith and not from the Qu'ran. Are they not? (I am confused now ...)  
So surely Hadith is of importance and of authority in Islamic teachings ... (?)<sup>225</sup>

While *glo's* comment seems to be asking for more information and clarification rather than being critical, another commenter is less polite. This highly critical commenter, who only identifies him- or herself with the initial Z, appears provoked by the discussion of texts. This commenter uses *Hadith* in a way that is highly critical of the original post, who quotes a *Hadith* about the sorts of people who will not enter heaven, and then adds:

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<sup>222</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/guest-post-the-right-of-the-inquiring-feminine/>. Retrieved 28 July, 2016.

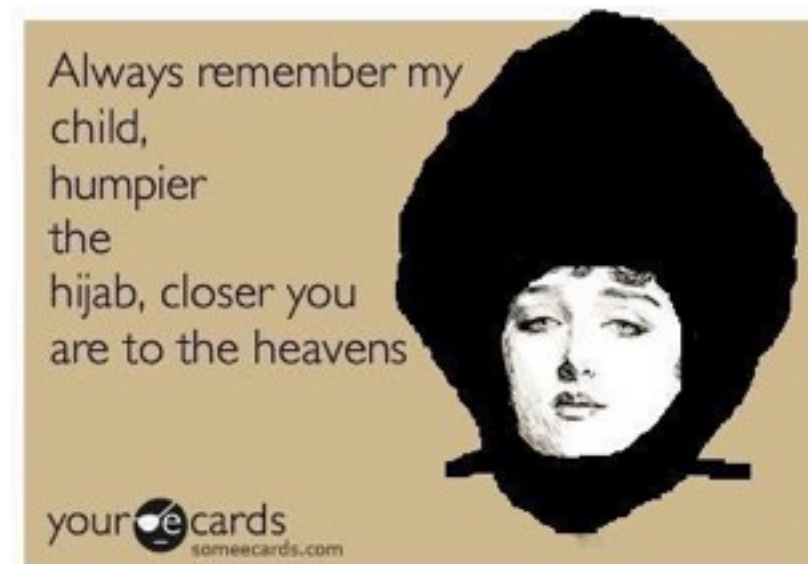
<sup>223</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/guest-post-the-right-of-the-inquiring-feminine/>. Retrieved 28 July, 2016.

<sup>224</sup> <http://madhatsmusings.blogspot.co.uk/> Retrieved 28 July, 2016.

<sup>225</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/guest-post-the-right-of-the-inquiring-feminine/>. Retrieved 28 July, 2016.

With regard to the phrase, “their heads are like the heads of camels, tilted to one side,” some of the scholars said that this means they make their heads look big because of the hairstyles they adopt and so on, so that it looks like the hump of a bakht camel. The bakht is a type of camel that has two humps between which there is a dip, so that one hump leans one way and the other leans the other way. When these woman make their heads look big in this way, they look like these humps. Source: <http://islamqa.info/en/ref/14627><sup>226</sup>

Beyond being critical of the Following this statement, Z adds another comment that responds to the joking illustration in the original post, (which is derived from the satirical site someecards.com),



The illustration is of a woman with a very large *hijab*, which has presumably been stuffed in the interest of fashion. It is, in fact, a variation of an e-card featuring the same drawing of a woman, with very voluminous hair, accompanied by the text: ‘The higher the hair, the closer to heaven, y’all!’<sup>227</sup> Whether or not Z is familiar with the Christian allusions on the original version or comedic intent of the card is unclear. Nevertheless, following on Z’s first post, she or he adds that “‘Humpier the hijab, closer you are to the heavens’”? In fact, it’s exactly the opposite. See my previous post above.’ Neither of these posts receive a direct response. This might be the result of them seeming to be an irrelevant or unnecessarily provocative question (or a rude one) or simply because none of the bloggers have the time to respond. It may also be the case that the timing of their comments make them seem less relevant to any of the original posters (either *Nahida* who wrote the post, or *Wood Turtle* who hosted it on her blog). The post was originally posted on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2012, and both *glo* and Z post their comments significantly after that (June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and July 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 respectively – four days can be a long time on the internet). The latest response from *Wood Turtle* to any

<sup>226</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/guest-post-the-right-of-the-inquiring-feminine/>. Retrieved 28 July, 2016.

<sup>227</sup> <https://www.someecards.com/usercards/viewcard/MjAxMy00ZmVkNmMyOWMxMjJiNDAY/>. Retrieved 1 October, 2017.

comments on that post was on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2012, and she describes in earlier posts that she has recently given birth to her second child. *Wood Turtle* continues to update her blog, but she has been a much less frequent poster since 2013. Additionally, the timing and tone of Z's comment, combined with the use of a pseudonym, suggests that he or she is an internet troll, actively seeking out conflict rather than to be part of the community. This in turn makes responses unlikely. Even though no firm conclusion can be drawn from the lack of response regarding proper use of *Hadith* in the comment section, it is a reminder that even blogs such as *Wood Turtle's* are not professional undertakings – unlike the comments section in an online newspaper, engagement for its own sake is not pursued. Furthermore, it points to the open-ended way in which such conversations often happen online; conclusions are less important than being a space for enacting religious identity.

#### **4.4 Religious hierarchy as authority on blogs**

In my primary sources, religious hierarchies are not often alluded to directly in the body of blog posts. When they are, the blog posts and comments where they are mentioned are divided between being either positive about something that an individual rabbi or imam has said, that someone should speak to their own religious leaders about a question, or between including an ambivalent or critical approach to the personalities and ideologies of such religious hierarchical leaders. The attitudes to male authority demonstrated by these loose networks of self-monitoring women bloggers range from acceptance (such as *Jew in the City* including posts by a rabbi, as discussed in Chapter Three), to ambivalence, to open resistance – occasionally within the same blog. Attitudes to religious hierarchy as a layer of authority does not, however, map directly on to how the bloggers describe their levels of adherence to religious dress. However, there is some indication that religious dress is an area where male authority is especially resisted.

Thus, religious hierarchy is a form of authority that is both embraced and challenged in these blogs – often both are seen in a single blog. These seemingly contradictory but highly personal attitudes can often co-exist on a single blog, as I discuss below, in examples from both Jewish blogs like *In The Pink* and the Muslim blogs like *Wood Turtle*. Furthermore, as those examples indicate, having a critical perception of religious leaders – both individuals or more broadly – does not necessarily entail that the bloggers are critical of the *roles* played by such leaders. Criticising imams and religious leaders in one post while writing another post about searching for a religious leader who elicits the respect with which their office should be imbued, is not regarded as contradictory on the blogs. This reflects both how blogging is an unstructured

enactment of the blogger's thoughts and feelings over time, as well as how much of authority online is personal, even when associated with more traditional structures such as religious hierarchies.

#### 4.4.1 Religious hierarchy as authority on Muslim blogs

For instance, *Wood Turtle* has blogged that she is disappointed in Muslim religious leaders in general.<sup>228</sup> Beyond being an isolated statement, she comments in response to *Nahida* (who blogs as *The Fatal Feminist*) that she is 'flabbergasted when spurious sayings are used by imams at the mosque to justify just about anything', suggesting that their (to her mind inaccurate) use of religious texts undermines their hierarchical authority. (Both *Wood Turtle*'s and *Nahida*'s responses to religious texts as a form of religious authority are discussed above.) However, she has also later written about approving of one imam's sermon<sup>229</sup> or, earlier, of having a 'favourite popular imam',<sup>230</sup> whose (public) Facebook page she links to.<sup>231</sup> Therefore, it is not simply a case that she conforms to or challenges religious hierarchy. As enacted on her blog, *Wood Turtle*'s attitude to religious authority is much more complicated than might be suggested by reading a single blog posts or captured in a ready binary of conforming or resistance.

This level of complexity about accepting, challenging or wishing to modify parts of religious authority is not a unique feature of *Wood Turtle*'s writing, but also something which is expressed in the comments section of her blog. Depending on their particular experiences and beliefs in relation to the topic (discussed in the original posts), her blog demonstrates a very typical array of commenters making different but mutually reinforcing statements about their views of offline religious hierarchies. Tying together the themes of dress and her religious identity as a Muslim woman who often describes the challenge of finding an inclusive mosque environment, *Wood Turtle* has written a post entitled *These boots are made for walking*.<sup>232</sup> Here, while her allusion to dress might initially suggest difference to the rest of the community, it is instead the act of putting on her complicated, steampunk boots, 'covered in rivets and a classic Victorian brass heel' after retrieving them from the 'post-Jummah shoe chaos'<sup>233</sup> that offer her the conversational opener that lead to meet a friendly 'sister' offline. Talking to another woman about the finer points

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<sup>228</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2011/11/17/hadith/>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016.

<sup>229</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2014/07/29/monday-moments-eid-mubarak-2/>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016.

<sup>230</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2013/08/07/sujood-in-the-kitchen-tears-in-the-mosque/>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016.

<sup>231</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sheikh-Mishary-Rashed-Alafasy/54613241190>. Retrieved 12 July, 2016. While this reference is, admittedly, to a Facebook page, it is a 'public' one, which does not require the reader to log in.

<sup>232</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2014/11/13/these-boots-were-made-for-walking/>. Retrieved 8 August, 2016.

<sup>233</sup> *Jummah* is the Friday prayer, held just after noon. A congregational prayer, it is done in a mosque. El-Guindi has analysed how attending Friday prayer forms an important part of the rhythm of Muslim life (2008:131).

of her appreciation for neo-Victorian dress forms the beginning and end of the blog post, offering ‘an instant spark of light after a previously long string of negative experiences.’ These negative experiences are not, however, about her religious dress, but about how she, as a woman attempting to pray with two small children, is treated by the community in her mosque.

*Wood Turtle*’s blog shows that she and the commenters have a complex relationship with both religious authority and with offline religious structures, while drawing support from their online religious community. She questions the imam’s ability to fulfil his religious role when women and children are separated from the men who are praying. *Wood Turtle* notes that the imam simply does not see or hear the ten children she has spotted in the mosque. For *Wood Turtle*, not being able to see the children both undermines the imam’s religious authority and a believer’s ability to fulfil their religious practice:

You cannot fulfil the sunnah of shortening the prayer when a baby cries if you cannot see the baby. And a person who feels they are spiritually and religiously required to at least see the imam to validate their prayer cannot do so, when the mother’s room is in a closet.<sup>234</sup>

This criticism of religious hierarchy is rooted in her interpretation of religious texts and of the wider religious tradition (Sunnah). The *Hadith* she references is collected by Sahih Bukhari and states:

The Prophet (sal Allahu alaihi wa sallam) said, “I stand in prayer and would like to make it long but I hear the crying of a child and shorten my prayer not wanting to make things difficult for its mother.”<sup>235</sup>

It seems that, in this instance, *Wood Turtle* considers the religious authority of the texts supersedes that of the religious hierarchical leader – even if it is a form of religious text (*Hadith*) which she elsewhere notes that she takes less seriously than the Quran. She is also alluding to rulings by Islamic scholars that people need to at least see or hear the imam to validate their praying in a mosque. She does not, however, mention that women’s mosque attendance at all has a long and contested history (Katz, 2013:202).<sup>236</sup> More recently, controversial conservative scholar al-Qaradawi has tempered his endorsement of women’s mosque participation with the argument that women should ask for male permission to go to the mosque, but that men should not stop them without good reason (Katz, 2013:205).

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<sup>234</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2014/11/13/these-boots-were-made-for-walking/>. Retrieved 8 August, 2016.

<sup>235</sup> <http://dailyhadith.adaptivesolutionsinc.com/hadith/Shortening-Prayer-for-Crying-Child.htm>. Retrieved October 1, 2017.

<sup>236</sup> Women’s mosque attendance is, perhaps unsurprisingly, also debated on popular (and controversial) Salafi websites, such as Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid’s [IslamQA.info](http://IslamQA.info), <https://islamqa.info/en/93369>, (retrieved 9 August 2016), and FatwaIslam (citing the late Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz): <http://www.fatwaislam.com/fis/index.cfm?scn=fd&ID=883>. Retrieved 9 August 2016.

However, despite *Wood Turtle*'s challenges with finding a religious hierarchical figure who fulfils her criteria, she does not appear to inherently reject religious hierarchical authority on her blog. This is perhaps best demonstrated by her writing in positive terms about the influence that the 'authority of the imam'<sup>237</sup> could have on her children in the mosque. Some of the commenters share similar stories to *Wood Turtle*'s, while others are more accepting of the religious hierarchical figures that they have come into contact with. Even though they read and comment on *Wood Turtle*'s blog, the commenters both affirm and challenge her conclusions. For example, affirming both *Wood Turtle*'s experience and the rights of the members of the community to not accommodate small children in the main hall of the mosque, one commenter notes that she has:

...been there, done that with 3 small kids. Both sides have to be respectful, though it is very tough to do that with 3 kids. Islam teaches tolerance...so if both parties could be a little tolerant, it would be nice. Of course, if the kids are really disturbing others, then there should be a nice, comfortable place for the parent to go with the kids.<sup>238</sup>

Others are more explicit in wholeheartedly supporting *Wood Turtle*, writing that 'I am certain your new found friend was a sign from Allah SWT. Subhanallah. Don't leave the mosque Woodturtle. We need your voice for change.'<sup>239</sup> Some of these voices of support encourage her to wait until her children are older until she brings them to the mosque. Others jokingly suggest that she move back to the town in Ontario, where she has (apparently) lived in the past, and where there is a more child friendly and inclusive mosque than the one her family currently attends.

Beyond these slight variations in attitudes to religious hierarchy, however, *Wood Turtle*'s views of religious hierarchy as something desirable but found lacking in individual instances and therefore (possibly) in need of reform, is echoed by many of the commenters on the post. Many are positive about their imams while being critical of some of the behaviours of others in their community. For instance, in some of the posts, there is a sense that if the imam knew about the problems, he would do something about it – that it is lack of knowledge alone that keeps the imam from making sure that the mosque is an inclusive space. Thus, one commenter writes that:

I think you should share your blog post with the Imam of the mosque you went to for jum'ah and ISNA or someone who is involved in the mosque that is open to feedback. It's important that they hear what you have to say and what others have to say. Regardless of what organization is running a mosque it will always be Allah (swt)'s house. The Muslim

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<sup>237</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2014/11/13/these-boots-were-made-for-walking/#more-7176>. Retrieved 8 August, 2016.

<sup>238</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2014/11/13/these-boots-were-made-for-walking/>. Retrieved 8 August, 2016.

<sup>239</sup> SWT is an acronym for Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala (glory to him, the exalted), while Subhanallah translates into 'Glory be to God'.



community in North America has a lot to learn when it comes to inclusivity, being open to one another and building health communities. If people like you and I left the mosque and did not struggle towards the changes that we want to see in our community change will never come. As a Muslim community we desperately need and must have access to the houses of Allah. I pray that one day our mosques will understand us better and serve us better. May Allah guide us and our communities.<sup>240</sup>

Here, the authority of the imam is invoked as a way of reforming religious practices to be in line with the needs of the women blogging. This approach is supported by another blogger. Indicating that such inclusive hierarchical figures exist offline, a third commenter shares a story about how her imam corrects people who are critical of bringing children to the mosque:

Our imam just went off on the community when a person told him “bringing children to the Masjid is equal to bringing in a dog!” He stated how the children are our future.<sup>241</sup>

In this comment, religious hierarchy appears to supersede religious ideology (in this case, the disapproving voices within the community) as a source of authority, offline, which in turn is used to reassure the online network about the magnanimity of religious hierarchical figures. The critical offline community member is much more conservative than either the religious leader or the online commenter. Writing about this conflict and its resolution on the internet is a way of not only demonstrating that these differences exist, but also that religious hierarchy is not inherently opposed to the bloggers’ concerns. Extending a promise of a positive offline experience, the same commenter offers to bring *Wood Turtle* and her children to sit with her and her children in the main hall of her own mosque, which she writes is in Pittsburgh – an indication of the geographical dispersion of this online network. The overriding sense, therefore, is that while the commenters may share *Wood Turtle*’s experiences with struggling to pray in the mosque with small children, they reinforce religious hierarchy rather than undermine it. Even in a post challenging religious ideology, the commenters thus argue that bringing the events to the attention of the imam would bring about change.

Even though *Wood Turtle* has a complex relationship with religious hierarchy, she cites an incident where she was influenced by a religious hierarchical figure regarding her religious dress. In a post about wearing the *hijab*, she notes that after having worn the hijab for some time and following how a *hijabi* friend was treated poorly by her community following a suicide attempt, she herself was struggling with wearing it:

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<sup>240</sup> ISNA is the Islamic Society of North America, an organisation with the goal of being an ‘exemplary and unifying Islamic organization in North America that contributes to the betterment of the Muslim community and society at large.’ <http://www.isna.net/mission-and-vision.html>. Retrieved September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>241</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2014/11/13/these-boots-were-made-for-walking/>. Retrieved 8 August, 2016.



Then my best friend decided to put it on. But before she did, we had a discussion with Sheikh Omar, a spiritual leader with the Naqshbandi Sufis. This was the FIRST TIME a MALE spiritual leader sat down privately with me. The three of us discussed the virtues and needs for hijab, and then he showed us the most moving thing: he took off his turban.

This is akin to a priest removing his collar, or a Jew taking off his yarmulke. Removing a sacred object and showing you what was beneath. He slowly lifted it off his head, and straightened himself out to his fullest height, and explained that without his turban, his soul was filled with worldly things, such as pride.... Then he put it back on and slowly sank into his seat, illustrating that when he wears it, he is humbled before God. It's his constant reminder that God is watching him.

It may have been the night of dhikr, the goofy sufis, the lovely tea, or the thrill of having unrestricted access to a spiritual leader — but I was tremendously moved by that simple act. And I think that idea has stayed with me the longest.<sup>242</sup>

The hyperlinks in this post (which I have left as underlined text) allows the reader to click through to a photo of a man wearing the turban she describes, as well as a link to the centre for Naqshbandi Sufism in Montreal's (French-language) website. This gives the reader both a visual idea of what the man behind the advice looks like, and also to find out more about the Sufi order that he belongs to. Beyond being illustrative, while this is not an explicit endorsement of Naqshbandi Sufism, it allows the reader to form a closer idea of that religious movement, and could potentially be understood as a form of religious hierarchical authority.

The extent to which such linking to online forms of hierarchical is effective, however, is unclear. Without clearer indication about the intent of her links and discussion of the role of the Sheikh at this stage of *Wood Turtle's* five stage journey toward *hijab*, this sort of authority regarding religious dress appears not to be absolute. The five stages of her *hijab* journey concludes with her describing her current style of wearing the *hijab*, emphasising the cultural contingency of different styles as well as the fluidity and organic nature of religion and the centrality of both femininity and sexuality to her Muslim identity, and a personal authority that stems from *Wood Turtle's* talents as a writer, enacting her gendered religious identity online. The limited interest in religious hierarchical figures online is suggested by the comments, none of which ask further about the Sheikh or indicate that they have developed a particular interest in Sufism as a result of reading the blog post. Instead, the comments are mutually reinforcing and supportive of *Wood Turtle's* personal authority such as this one by the poster *Nafissa*, who writes that:

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<sup>242</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/hijab-5-0-part-two/#more-134>, Retrieved 12 March, 2016. Although *dhikr* can have a range of implications, ranging from private to or public worship, in this context *Wood Turtle* appears to be using the term to indicate a form of worship associated with Sufism, where the names of God or his attributes are recited repeatedly (Salih, 2010: 1-2).

This post has touched my heart. I can more accurately see my own “hijab phases” by reading about yours. It’s one of those “A-ha experiences” for me. Thank you for sharing this.<sup>243</sup>

Perhaps this lack of a receptive audience is why there are so few mentions of religious hierarchy in blog posts that are explicitly about religious dress, compared to the personal authority that stems from, for example, *Wood Turtle*’s subjective expressions and ability to communicate in writing.

#### 4.4.2 Religious hierarchy and authority on Jewish blogs

It is also not common that online religious hierarchical authorities are directly referenced to on posts about religious dress on the Jewish blogs. As might be inferred from the fact that it is the form of religious authority most sensitive to the way in which the internet allows for dissemination of ideas, religious hierarchy is the form of authority most questioned on the blogs, as scandals involving religious leaders have rocked small communities. However, while some of these might be systemic, such as *Kvetching Editor*’s challenging the cost of conversion to Orthodox Judaism, it is often more linked to individual failings among religious leaders, albeit set in the context of the implications that their behaviour. For instance the recent scandal, where rabbi Barry Freundel was caught spying on undressed female converts in the *mikveh*, is mentioned on *You’re Not Crazy* as a cause she is getting involved with, as one of the people who has converted under his auspices.<sup>244</sup> The hypocrisy of the rabbi’s behaviour, especially in light of the emphasis on religious modesty, is one which is deemed unacceptable, but not enough to undermine religious hierarchy as a form of legitimate authority.<sup>245</sup> In general, however, religious hierarchy online does not, however, appear to be a sort of authority especially relevant to many of the blog posts dealing explicitly with religious dress.

However, while both Muslim and Jewish women are quick to point out the limitations of their religious knowledge even when bloggers do not challenge hierarchical authority, other forms of authority appear to be at work as well. The bloggers recognise that their interpretation of religious practices could be regarded as challenging religious hierarchy. Hence, even though they might be answering direct questions from readers, such as ‘Why do Jewish women not wear pants,

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<sup>243</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/hijab-5-0-part-two/#more-134>. Retrieved 12 March, 2016.

<sup>244</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2016/06/big-changes-and-radio-appearance-are.html>. Retrieved 5 August, 2016.

<sup>245</sup> Freundel has since been convicted: Markoe, Lauren (2015). ‘A Year after Peeping-Tom Rabbi Arrested, Congregation Perseveres’. *The Huffington Post*. 13 October. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/barry-freundel-congregation\\_us\\_561d7837e4b028dd7ea59a8c](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/barry-freundel-congregation_us_561d7837e4b028dd7ea59a8c). Retrieved 6 September, 2016. Jaffe, Harry (2016). ‘The Devastating Story of Washington’s Peeping-Tom Rabbi’. *Washingtonian*. 3 January. <https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/01/03/washington-dc-peeping-rabbi-barry-freundel-voyeurism-case/>. Retrieved 6 September, 2016.

even today when there are differences between men and women's pants?' on *Jew in the City*, or writing a long post about what not to wear to meeting a religious court in *You're not Crazy*, they emphasise that they are not themselves religious hierarchical authorities. For instance, *Kochava* at *You're not Crazy's* 'About Me' page includes a section explicitly positioning her authority as being different to that derived from religious hierarchy:

**Basic disclaimer:** I am not a rabbi. I am entirely self-taught in Jewish practice, tradition, and halacha. The statements on this blog are my understandings, opinions, personal knowledge, and predictions based on anecdotal evidence. I have been known to be wrong.<sup>246</sup>

The implication here is that she is fallible ('known to be wrong'), and alongside offering links to her own thoughts and experiences about conversion, there is a tab on the top of her blog that contains links to sites closely associated with religious hierarchy, including *aish.com* (which is run by an Orthodox outreach organisation). Thus, despite her posing questions to her online community about different aspects of religious dress practices, such as asking about wearing the colour red, the standard of excellence for transmitting Jewish religious knowledge remains the traditional hierarchical one; a rabbi. Nevertheless, when *Kochava* links to writing by an Orthodox rabbi (Eli Fink) when discussing modest dress, from a post she has found from another (male) blogger, she does not appear to accept the rabbi's hierarchical authority without question.<sup>247</sup> Instead, *Kochava* adds that 'While researching this post, I ran across a great blog post that sums up a lot of my frustrations, written by Rabbi Eli Fink, but posted on *DovBear: Tznius: Is Following Halacha Sufficient?*'. Hence, rather than something that she accepts without question, *Kochava* appears to use Rabbi Fink's hierarchical authority as an endorsement for her own 'understandings, opinions, personal knowledge'.

Similarly, much as on the Muslim blogs, questioning authority based on religious hierarchy on the Jewish blogs tends to be based more on the individual's experience of different rabbis than on the institution itself. For instance, *Hadassah* who blogs on *In the Pink* is very positive about the rabbis interviewed in an article she posts about the link between beauty standards among matchmakers that encourage thinness and its concomitant triggering of eating disorders among young Orthodox girls.<sup>248</sup> This does not, however, contradict her having previously been critical of a rabbi's advice that she should have another child in order to facilitate her immigration process to the United States following her second marriage. Much as on many of the Muslim blogs, it appears that

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<sup>246</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/p/about-chavi.html>. Retrieved 16 October, 2015.

<sup>247</sup> <http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/word-of-day-tznius-v-tznua.html>. Retrieved 17 August, 2016.

<sup>248</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/rabbis-sound-alarm-over-eating-disorders/>. Retrieved June 21, 2016.

dress, or blogging about dress, is not necessarily something she would discuss with her rabbi. In fact, *Hadassah* explicitly mentions that while she is closely involved in her offline religious community, she would not ask her rabbi about every aspect of her lived religious practice:

What I really don't believe in is running to the rabbi or spiritual leader to ask about every single thing in your life. I live a religious life. I keep as many mitzvot as I can. I know what it means to live as an Orthodox Jew. Occasionally questions come up – and when I am not sure about halacha I will consult the rabbi. I will not ask him whether the time is right for me to buy a new house, or if my son should be allowed to check his email, or if I should blog about how my husband loves my hair.<sup>249</sup>

This does not, however, mean that she questions religious hierarchical authority as such. Not that she, as she herself describes it, 'shops' around for a rabbi who is likely to offer lenient rulings on matters of religious law (*halacha*). Instead, it appears that there are areas, regarding religious practice and how she discusses it online and about internet use in the home (her son checking his email), that *Hadassah* does not consider falling under her rabbi's jurisdiction – even within an observant religious framework.

*Hadassah's* commenters both agree and disagree with her stance about when religious hierarchical authority should be consulted. One commenter responds with 'When you have a question, you like to ask Twitter before you ask a rabbi. :o)'.<sup>250</sup> It is unclear whether this comment is intended as being exclusively amused, an accurate description or if it contains a kernel of criticism. Other commenters are entirely supportive of *Hadassah's* approaches to religious authority:

This is why I LOVE you and cannot get enough of your blog.. because you speak your truth–you are not afraid to be honest–such an admirable quality– I wish MORE people followed your lead.. I know you inspire me to.<sup>251</sup>

The questions as to whether or not this is an acceptable way of approaching authority from religious hierarchy on the blogs is debated. For instance, one commenter notes that she agrees with *Hadassah* but does not think this should be extended to others. By contrast, others challenge her approach by saying that they believe rabbis should be asked about a very wide range of subjects. *Hadassah* responds that, 'My two main things that I would always ask would be a niddah question or kashruth. I just don't know enough.' (These are questions about ritual purity following menstruation and about food rules.) Blogging and religious dress do not fall under either of those categories, and

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<sup>249</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/rabbis-are-guides-not-dictators/>. Retrieved June 28, 2016.

<sup>250</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/rabbis-are-guides-not-dictators/>. Retrieved June 28, 2016.

<sup>251</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/rabbis-are-guides-not-dictators/>. Retrieved June 28, 2016.

would therefore seem to be subjects that *Hadassah*, and many of the other bloggers, feel they can think about and discuss freely.

Limited mentions of religious hierarchy do not, therefore, necessarily mean that such authority is discredited and undermined. It might also be an indication that the topics are not considered to be something inherently considered appropriate for either blogs or for matters about religious dress. For instance, *Princess Lea* who blogs as *The Frumanista* comments on a post about modest dress on *Out of the Orthobox* that:

Rabbi Yisroel Reisman NEVER talks about tznius, because he knows the damage its misrepresentation has caused. If a child has learned their other subjects properly, if they have been valued and ordered to value herself, then she will dress accordingly.<sup>252</sup>

She also links back to a previous blog post of hers that mentions that extensively discussing modest dress not in and of itself modest. She has also previously mentioned this on a blog run by men, on a post about the modesty debate in Orthodox Judaism, suggesting that it is something that she considers an important concern, as well as an indication of how engaged she is with her online community.<sup>253</sup> There is some indication on Muslim blogs, such as *One Beauty of Islam*, that gaining an ego boost for blogging about religious dress might be considered something that needs to be tempered: 'Ego is one of the most hated character traits in Allah SWT's eyes and I don't ever want this blog to turn into something about me only.'<sup>254</sup> These would both be interesting avenues for future research.

#### 4.5 Unorthodox sources of conservative ideas

While some blog posts might include direct references to religious texts, they do not necessarily come from conventional structures of religious authority, but have instead been drawn from wider reading. If you were only to read this section of a longer post on *Kvetching Editor* (her post from a week earlier, about wearing a *sheitel*, or a wig, rather than a *tichel*, or scarf, attracted 50 comments, a fact that she comments on in the early section of this post)<sup>255</sup> it appears that the blogger, *Chaviva* is engaging directly with the religious texts. She explicitly references Numbers 5:11-20, Sifrei Bamidbar11, Gemara Ketubot 72a-b as well as debates about Dat Moshe or Dat Yehudi (whether a law is derived from the Torah/Moses or is a custom of the Jewish people and therefore subject to

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<sup>252</sup> <http://outoftheorthobox.com/christian-modesty-jewish-modesty/?v=79cba1185463>. Retrieved 12 June, 2016.

<sup>253</sup> Comments from Frumanista about how talking about modest is immodest: <http://popchassid.com/suck-modesty-debate/>. Retrieved 27 July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>254</sup> <http://1beautyofislam.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/its-been-awhile-since-ive-posted.html>. Retrieved September 3rd, 2016

<sup>255</sup> <http://mamaloshen.blogspot.co.uk/2010/08/taking-hair-plunge.html>. Retrieved 6 July, 2016.

region, familial contexts).<sup>256</sup> Though written in the conversational tone characteristic of most blog posts, the multiple references to specific religious texts, as well as the personal reflections of what they mean and imply, might suggest that this passage is an example of the blogger responding to the primary religious texts.

However, the comments for this post suggest otherwise. Rather than being an example of a blogger engaging directly with the religious texts, the analysis she offers is instead derived from secondary popular texts. This becomes clear through an exchange in the comments section, which indicates both the persistence of conservative religious practice in the face of changing information. Additionally, the exchange between *Chaviva* and the commenter suggest that religious textual authority online does not necessarily depend on engaging with primary texts or interpretation from a religious hierarchical source. Thus, an anonymous commenter responds to *Chaviva's* enthusiastic post about the texts that underpin hair covering by suggesting that *Chaviva* should read Lynne Shreiber's book *Covering Your Hair*. The latter is a collection of first person narratives about hair covering mixed with religious legal discussions. This comment includes a direct link to the online bookstore, as well as a link to the author's website and a quick description of the change in Shreiber's religious practice:

<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Hide-and-Seek/Lynne-Meredith-Schreiber/e/9789657108482>

The author explores these issues, as she was a baalat Teshuva and was curious. She has since divorced, stopped covering her hair and practices a little differently now.

<http://www.lynneschreiber.com/><sup>257</sup>

Here, we see not only the intersection between non-traditional sources of religious authority, but also how closely sharing knowledge online can be linked to the consumerist element of the internet – 'even' when this includes enacting religious identities. The anonymous commenter posts these comments, both as a way of giving a recommendation but presumably to also to temper *Chaviva's* enthusiasm for hair covering; her original positivity about hair covering might be modified if she reads a book that is really positive about the practice, and then learns about the Schreiber's change in opinion and practice. Indicating that the anonymous commenter is offering recommendations as a way of curbing *Chaviva's* enthusiasm, he or she suggests *Chaviva* look to an article posted on 'the OU's Shabbat Shalom site'. In this case, OU stands for Orthodox Union, and the website's 'About'

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<sup>256</sup> <http://mamaloshen.blogspot.co.uk/2010/08/covering-your-hair-why.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 6 July, 2016.

<sup>257</sup> <http://mamaloshen.blogspot.co.uk/2010/08/covering-your-hair-why.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 6 July, 2016.



section includes the description of the Orthodox Union as the ‘world’s largest Jewish resource’.<sup>258</sup> The blog post the anonymous commenter refers to contains an argument against wigs (other than if women are working in jobs, such as on Wall Street, where they need to ‘present themselves in as neutral way as possible’<sup>259</sup>) and in defence of sheitels, or headscarves, and snoods. The latter two, the writer Barbara Bensoussan argues, better ‘reflect the values we hold dear for a Jewish woman: simplicity, low-key and unostentatious styles of dress and behavior, a certain degree of *emes* (truth).’ However, the anonymous commenter’s attempt to challenge *Chaviva*’s interpretation by referring to other sources of authority, such as a website affiliated with offline religious hierarchy, does not appear to influence how she understands *tzniut*.

As it transpires, *Chaviva*’s response shows that she basing her own use of religious texts on that same secondary text. Thus, she is depending on Schreiber, rather than directly reading the religious texts she cites, or on more conventional sources of rabbinic interpretation:

@Anon I'm basing much of what I know off of her book. I'll be interested in catching up with how she practices now. But since she's divorced, she's not required to cover any longer...<sup>260</sup>

Rather than appearing sheepish about being caught lacking consistent attribution to the interpretation of the text, *Chaviva* displays no embarrassment about the post not being heavily based on readings of primary texts. Additionally, she is untroubled by drawing on a secondary source written by another woman who is also not a conventional, male hierarchical religious authority figure. In fact, Schreiber’s book is in many ways a precursor to the sort of narratives about hair covering that are prevalent online: it depends on first person narratives by women who cover their hair, framed by the author’s own considerations about hair covering.

As the comments continue, it becomes clear that, while the research into religious texts underpinning Schreiber’s book are what has attracted *Chaviva* to it, other elements of the book, ‘a beautiful look’ as well as Schreiber’s own practice, are at part of what lends the textual interpretation particular authority. Nevertheless, *Chaviva* does not change her stance on hair-covering based on new information about the writer of the text she uses for this post. Instead, the blog post puts personal ethical convictions at the forefront of interpretations of religious texts about

<sup>258</sup> <https://www.ou.org/about/>. Retrieved 30 July 30, 2016.

<sup>259</sup> Bensoussan, Barbara (2007). ‘Flipped Over the Wig: How I Came to Shun the Sheitel.’ *Orthodox Union*. 15 February. [https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/flipped\\_over\\_the\\_wig1/](https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/flipped_over_the_wig1/). Retrieved 30 July 30, 2016.

<sup>260</sup> <http://mamaloshen.blogspot.co.uk/2010/08/covering-your-hair-why.html#comment-form>. Retrieved 6 July, 2016.

dress, regardless of whether or not they cite religious texts directly, or whether they simply allude to them.

Similarly, Muslim blogs show often unorthodox sources of inspiration for religious dress. For instance, *Scarf Ace*, the blogger behind *scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica*,<sup>261</sup> dedicates several posts to not only the variations in her religious dress, but also to the various sources of authority that influence her religious dress. Drawing attention to how religious dress practices are not static, she adds that 'Who knows how I may change my mind as time and experience go by'. She writes that she wore the *hijab* in high school, stopped wearing it, and has since chosen to wear it again to become more visible in her Muslim identity to secular Americans following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. She often mentions discussing *hijab* with her husband,<sup>262</sup> including how he is worried that people seeing the two of them walking will believe that he has forced her to wear it.<sup>263</sup> She also blogs about religious texts,<sup>264</sup> including those of other religious faiths.<sup>265</sup> She also blogs about feeling judged by the community, when her *hijab* is not quite on point, indicating the importance of the religious ideology as a source of authority:

Whenever it fell off my head and I had to put it back on, it brought back another fear I have in wearing the headscarf--judgements from other Muslims, especially those that wear the islamic hijab. These women judge each other, they say, "she's not wearing it the right way." And like my brother keeps noticing, "aren't you supposed [sic] to wear it THAT way." The rule is to cover your hair, your ears, and your neck with the head scarf. You can only expose your face, hands, and feet (some disagree with the feet thing). Ok, I know that. But is it really all or nothing? I stuck with nothing for a long time because I am not ready to put on the full fledged pinned under the neck hijab and long flowing jacket called jilbab or ababya. I didn't want these Muslims, men or women, to look at me and think, "she's wrong." or come up to me and say "this scarf is on wrong." A Muslim guy came up to my friend who wears the scarf and told her that her jeans were too tight for hijab, and once when my mom and I met with the maulana (leader) of our muslim center, he later told us, "you don't even know how to wear hijab!" we had our salwar kameez and large chador (wide scarf) wrapped around us, but since our bangs showed or since we had not pinned the scarves under our chin---we were wrong and should be ashamed.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com>. Retrieved August 2nd, 2016.

<sup>262</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/bismillahiramanirraheem.html>. Retrieved August 2nd, 2016.

<sup>263</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/just-add-headscarf.html> Retrieved 20 January 20, 2012.

<sup>264</sup> [http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/as-i-was-saying\\_24.html](http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/as-i-was-saying_24.html). Retrieved 20 January 20, 2012.

<sup>265</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/i-find-history-of-headscarves.html>. Retrieved 20 January 20, 2012.

<sup>266</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/2007/04/first-day-back-on-scarf-team.html>. Retrieved 13 January, 2012.



However, while she recognises the community as a form of authority, she does not necessarily completely conform to what she believes to be their demands. Thus, the post shows her insisting that she is not ready to wear a more conservative form of religious dress than the one she currently wears. Additionally, she enacts resistance to such authority by drawing attention to the diversity of opinions and ways to be Muslim: 'There is not just one face of Islam.'<sup>267</sup> That the many 'faces' of Islam are not represented in the media is something she challenges, arguing that the lack of veiled Muslim women in the public eye makes it more difficult to wear the *hijab*. To counteract this, she watches mainstream television shows such as *Everyone Loves Raymond* and imagines that the female lead was wearing a head scarf<sup>268</sup> and draws on other blogs, youtube tutorials and photos of celebrities as inspiration.<sup>269</sup>

In describing the interactions between these various sources of religious authority and her decisions to wear religious dress, *Scarf Ace* also draws on exclusively online sources. In a post entitled 'Under the Label', from July 2009,<sup>270</sup> *Scarf Ace* moves from writing about discussing how she wears her *hijab* with her husband to how her but in relationship to standards proclaimed by *DA Hijabi Code*, a since-defunct open Facebook group which promotes wearing of the hijab. *DA Hijabi Code* included a jokey classification of the different 'kinds' of *hijabis*, including 'hijabi hoes', 'hijabi hopefuls' and 'hot hijabis'.<sup>271</sup> *Scarf Ace* accepts that, according to this system, she is a 'Half Hijabi', one of the:

...lovely ladies are the ones caught in the Limbo between Hijab or No Hijab. "to be or not to be" is the question for these girls. With thier Hijab half on thier head and half off...u never know what they will do next! On the bright side though guys dont have to wonder whats hiding beneath those hijabs cuz these half hijabis give everyone a sneak peak 24/7. We say to ya'll with nothing but frustration..MAKE UP UR MIND! (ur confusing the kafirs.)<sup>272</sup>

*Scarf Ace* uses this quotation as a starting off point for writing about how she is unsure about what she believes in terms of her clothing and how she demonstrates these.

<sup>267</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/2007/04/first-day-back-on-scarf-team.html>. Retrieved 20 January, 2012.

<sup>268</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2007/04/its-lonely-at-top-of-my-head.html>. Retrieved 20 January, 2012.

<sup>269</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/fashion-and-faith.html>. Retrieved 2 August, 2016.

<sup>270</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/2009/07/under-label.html>. Retrieved 20 January, 2012.

<sup>271</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2204765316&v=wall>. Retrieved 26 January, 2012. Has since gone offline, only kept here as reference.

<sup>272</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/2009/07/under-label.html>, Retrieved 20 January, 2012

*Scarf Ace's* dress, and her relationship to the online community she belongs to, turns into a discussion of how she needs to 'submit' in order to believe fully. These questions are also mentioned in the comments section. For instance, the commenter calling herself *LILY* not only sympathises with *Scarf Ace's* struggles with her practice as well as with her discussions with her husband, but also calls out the writers of 'DA Hijabi Code':

Really, i don't appreciate the frustrations of the people who wrote the Hejabi Code, as they should have more patience for the sisters who are really going thru it in an effort to wear the hejab.<sup>273</sup>

*LILY* also shares her personal experiences and own problems in wearing the hijab, as means of supporting *Scarf Ace*. *Eyes serene*, another commenter, offers a brief suggestion that:

Assalamu alaikom, It's such an intensely personal choice that I don't think anyone should criticize or judge... Sure, everyone's got opinions, but that's where it ends (speaking of opinions, there's mine!).<sup>274</sup>

The effects of these comments on *Scarf Ace* are unclear as she does not respond, but the fact that she leaves them on the blog suggests that she thinks they add to the experience of reading her post. Online and offline sources of authority can come from many sources, as long as they allow *Scarf Ace* to 'evolve at my own pace,'<sup>275</sup> as her role as arbiter of these different sources of religious authority is an important part of how she enacts her online identity.

Some of the forms of personal religious authority on the internet is related to celebrities. For instance, *Orthofeminist* writes about trying to figure out what she believes and practices in terms of head covering. While she often mentions being involved in her offline religious community, she regrets the gossip in her community about how much or little a woman covers her hair, and notes that she knows that *halachot* (religious laws) arguing that they mainly depend on the *minhag hamakom*. The latter she glosses as 'the customs of the place' suggesting either that she herself is uncomfortable with the Hebrew terminology (unlikely, given that she lives in an Orthodox Jewish community) or that she translates it as a courtesy to readers who might not be entirely familiar with the language. *Orthofeminist* posts that she has done a lot of reading about hair covering, and also drawn inspiration, perhaps more surprisingly in light of Campbell's schema about sources of

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<sup>273</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/2009/07/under-label.html>. Retrieved 20 January, 2012.

<sup>274</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/2009/07/under-label.html>. Retrieved 20 January, 2012. 'Assalamu alaikom' meaning 'Peace be upon you', is used as a greeting.

<sup>275</sup> <http://scarfacewearingaheadscarfinamerica.blogspot.co.uk/2007/04/fear-of-commitment.html>. Retrieved 2 August 2016.

religious authority, from actress and activist Mayim Bialik's discussions about hair covering. *Orthofeminist* notes that, in relation to the customs of the place:

...the rabbis lament how, over the years, Jewish women have forsaken the mitzvah of covering their hair, but now that uncovered hair is a commonplace occurrence, it is no longer halachically required.<sup>276</sup>

Challenging hierarchical interpretation as a source of authority, she argues, even though 'a plethora of rabbis' would disagree, it is no longer necessary to do cover one's hair. She says this decision began at work, in a multicultural environment:

My decision to not cover my hair in most situations started with my decision not to cover my hair at work. I really don't think that scarves and hats are suitable for a professional environment. Sure, there is a Muslim woman that works in my office who covers her hair and neck with fancy scarves and nobody bats an eyelash. There are a couple of men who wear kippahs. I'm pretty sure that there is a woman who wears a shaital, but I'm not a hundred percent sure it isn't natural hair. Still, I don't feel it's appropriate *for me*.<sup>277</sup>

Her hair covering is also not done in an Orthodox Jewish bubble, but instead informed by many different forms of religious authority, enacted online. She claims that religious authority is not there to back it, that she does not want to be seen as a 'religious fanatic'. Instead, she draws on her personal experience as a source of authority in part because, beyond not thinking hats and scarves are appropriate office wear, she really dislikes the feeling and appearance of wigs.

*Orthofeminist* also draws on slightly more unexpected sources of authority for hair covering, including blog posts by Orthodox celebrity Mayim Bialik. Bialik's fame demonstrates an interesting intersection of secular and religious fame. She is largely famous as an actress in mainstream American television shows (having played the title role in 1990s teen television series *Blossom*, which aired on NBC, and currently plays neuroscientist Dr Amy Farrah Fowler on CBS's *The Big Bang Theory*).<sup>278</sup> However, she is also a neuroscientist and active in the Jewish Orthodox blogosphere; frequently quoted on *Jew in the City* (she was paired with founder Allison in the Partners in Torah study session),<sup>279</sup> she is a regular contributor to Kveller.com and recently (late 2015) founded the website Grok Nation,<sup>280</sup> which offer in-depth and personal writing about (among other things) her fame, parenting, faith and culture. Reading a post by Mayim Bialik on Grok

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<sup>276</sup> <https://orthofeminist.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/covering-my-hair-and-figuring-out-whats-right-for-me/>. Retrieved 17 May, 2016.

<sup>277</sup> <https://orthofeminist.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/covering-my-hair-and-figuring-out-whats-right-for-me/>. Retrieved 17 May, 2016.

<sup>278</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0204146/>. Retrieved 1 October, 2017.

<sup>279</sup> <http://jewinthecity.com/2009/05/mayim-bialik-to-guest-star-on-a-very-special-jew-in-the-city/>. Retrieved 9 August, 2016.

<sup>280</sup> <http://groknation.com/>. Retrieved 9 August, 2016.

Nation about hair covering after divorce has, apparently, reminded *Orthofeminist* of why she wanted to cover her hair after marriage.<sup>281</sup> Combining these many different forms of authority, she wears hair coverings sometimes, though it tends to be at Shabbat (even at home) or at the meal following the blessings at a religious wedding, but she claims that these are dependent on whether she thinks that the situation demands it.

#### **4.6 Multiple forms of religious authority**

Religious authority on the blogs is thus drawn from a complex set of sources, including personal responses to religious texts seen as especially canonical (or accessible). As mentioned above, taking a gendered approach to the primary sources suggests that being a male commenter on the posts about religious dress means that the commenter is seen to have less rather than more authority on the matter of religious dress. Nevertheless, conforming to religious dress rules does not depend exclusively on drawing inspiration from conventional religious sources. However, such a proliferation of sources does not mean that the subjective turn, enacted online is a rejection of conservative interpretations of religious practices. As demonstrated in previous examples, there are also often indications of a combination of forms of authority appearing on many of the blogs. For instance, lived experience and compelling writing styles appear to be encouraging forms of religious authority where, although they may have precedent in the offline world, are influenced by the underlying logic of the media of blogs. For the next section of this chapter, I will discuss how two different phenomena, both aggregation and closing of down trolling commenters, are further enactments of personal authority in these blogs. Notably I argue that these enactments of authority owe as much to the medium of blogs as they do to any offline forms of religious authority. Therefore, the ways women who blog about religious dress use and depend on authority online combines the four layers of authority that Campbell (2007) envisions, as well as forms of authority, or at least techniques of using authority to silence (male) intruders in online networks, which are similar to those used by secular women. The forms of loose authority that are aspects of the media, are used by religious women to assert their leadership in this arena. Similarly, some of the language and forms of authority the bloggers use seem to owe more to the internet than to traditional forms of authority.

Similarly to *Chaviva's* use of the 'Ask Me Anything' structure from Reddit, or the refashioning of spoof ecards to be relevant to *hijabis*, forms of expression, beyond blogging itself,

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<sup>281</sup><https://orthofeminist.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/hair-covering-revisited-sheva-brachot/#comments>.

Retrieved 17 May 17, 2016.

that are commons on the ‘secular’ internet, often pop up on the blogs. Giving an internet-native gloss to the argument that the onus in religious modesty and dress needs to include where and how men look at women occurs on both Muslim and Jewish blogs, *Altie*, who blogs at *MoVing oN*, has published a blog post entitled *#questionsformen*.<sup>282</sup> The title and theme of this post are clearly derived from the Twitter trend of the same title that began a few months before.<sup>283</sup> The trend included people, especially women, asking men rhetorical questions about everyday misogyny. *Altie* adds a few questions of her own, seemingly drawn from her own experiences, including ‘What would you do if a married woman flashed her abs and told you she’s been working out lately? (Don’t answer that one.)’<sup>284</sup> The generality of the allusion aside – directed at ‘men’ rather than obviously using specific examples – *Altie* nevertheless includes men’s modesty in her understanding of *tzniut*. In keeping with her blog’s subtitle that ‘Not sure where to, but I’ll figure it out along the way’, *Altie* expresses her opinions about men’s roles in modesty rules online, even as she describes occasionally struggling with working out how best to do this offline.

Additionally, while she embraces the format of challenging men’s behaviour from Twitter, *Altie* also worries about being a corrupting influence, in part because of the information available to her, thanks to living in a less insular community with access to the internet. For example, she writes about feeling ‘bad’ for encouraging a workplace conversation about sex which seemed to disregard the sheltered experiences of her new (male) manager. Her description of him uses *his* religious dress as a code for his beliefs, and experiences ‘ultra-orthodox, a Chassidisher guy with white shirt, black pants, curly payos, the whole nine yards.’<sup>285</sup> She interprets his follow up questions ‘about sex, protection, what actually works, etc’, as indications of his ‘innocence’ (rather than, for example, attraction). However, she expresses regret about her role in (perhaps immodestly?), ‘opening his mind to the world around him’, as she considers it insensitive to his choices and upbringing. One of the commenters, however, argues that *Altie*’s behaviour was not so bad:

But you know what? He could have walked away, and he chose not to. So, I think he was looking for information and didn’t know how to get it. Better that you explain it to him than he look it up on the internet.<sup>286</sup>

<sup>282</sup> <http://alta-b.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/questionsformen.html>. Retrieved 25 July 25, 2016.

<sup>283</sup> Vitto, Laura (2015). ‘17 #QuestionsForMen that call attention to causal sexism’. Mashable. 3 February. <http://mashable.com/2015/02/03/questionsformen-hashtag/#VEMfiqXLYgqK>. Retrieved September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>284</sup> <http://alta-b.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/questionsformen.html>. Retrieved 25 July, 2016.

<sup>285</sup> <http://alta-b.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/all-about-sx.html>. Retrieved 25 July, 2016.

<sup>286</sup> <http://alta-b.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/all-about-sx.html>. Retrieved 25 July, 2016.

Indicating that her concerns about her behaviour is not constant and that it depends on the surrounding context, a post from the following month shows *Altie* less concerned about corrupting very religious people, and more concerned about how her religious dress might be perceived by other Jewish people. After describing how she has begun working out at the gym of her college, she adds that:

I wear a skirt on top of my leggings, and usually a long sleeved t-short. I feel comfortable being in a mixed gym, it doesn't bother me. But today, while working out a frum guy with a kippa came in. Something in me suddenly got self-conscious, like oh, this is weird. Being around other guys in the gym didn't bother me, but maybe with our mutual faith it hit closer to home.<sup>287</sup>

This self-consciousness does not necessarily translate into *Altie* changing her behaviour, but the three examples suggest that modesty rules have a complicated, gendered dimension. She is concerned about being immodestly dressed around Jewish men, but is also worried that her greater worldliness means that she might be a corrupting influence on Jewish men from more conservative communities. She discusses these matters online, and with her commenters, who support her interpretations and reinforce her behaviour. However, these examples suggest that religious dress is not only more complex than women being told to wear certain things, but also that women's roles as monitors of modesty within their communities and across group boundaries are constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated offline, and enacted online.

#### **4.7 Managing men's attitudes online**

As discussed in Herring et al (2002), secular feminist fora indicate that there is a relatively standardised way of managing trolls in women's online spaces. Male online harassment, ranging from the relatively harmless to the very threatening, has been an aspect of internet since the 1990s (Herring et al. 2002:273). Given the controversies surrounding religious dress, it is unsurprising that posts about religious dress sometimes attract (male) trolls, who deliberately involve themselves in the conversation to deliberately distract or infuriate the commenters. The ways in which the bloggers manage such interjections depend on using several of the different forms of religious authority, as well as similar, medium-driven tactics to those used by the (secular) feminist group in Herring et al.'s article. As discussed in Chapter One, there is religious precedent for being critical of gossip and slander, and trolling could be included under those categories. The similarity between slander and trolling has been noted by for instance, *Sharon* at *Fashion-Isha*, who has written explicitly about trolling and how it is included under the ban against *lashon hara* (speaking ill of

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<sup>287</sup> <https://alta-b.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/a-frum-guy-walks-into-gym.html>. Retrieved 26 July, 2016.



others).<sup>288</sup> More often, there is a more general request for being respectful in comments, such as *Maha Muslimah* following her comment that she ‘created this public space in order to explore her interior space’ and that she ‘reserves the right and responsibility to remove any comments that express hate towards *any* particular people’.<sup>289</sup> As a result, the ways both Muslim and Jewish women bloggers manage men’s attitudes to religious dress in the online space suggest that their authority is derived from both their expertise in using the medium, as well as their use of different forms of religious authority online. This can either be done by women who are explicitly feminist, such as *Nahida*, those who write that they ‘talk the talk but don’t really walk the walk’,<sup>290</sup> like *Hadassah*, or those who like *Princess Lea* are much more ambivalent about feminism.<sup>291</sup> Frequently, the comment sections may contain comments by male-sounding names: but discussions about dress in the networks I have studied are generally dominated by women’s authority.

One way in which critical male commenters are silenced, and men’s offline behaviour is criticised in these online networks, is through drawing on women’s knowledge of the relevant forms of religious authority. For instance, the argument that the onus in religious modesty is less about what women wear and that it needs to include where and how men look at women, occurs on both Muslim and Jewish blogs. For example, *Nahida* at *The Fatal Feminist*, blogs about how the Quran is used to explain why wearing a headscarf can be of value but is not an a requirement in Islam. She also the requirement is also for men not to look, and that their comments about her religious dress – or lack thereof – are not welcome. She describes herself as wearing *hijab* to mosque and that it is something that she wears occasionally and might do again, but that it not an everyday part of her religious practice. For example, while one of the (Jewish blogger) *Frumanista*’s blog posts about men’s requirements in *tzniut* contains less swearing than *The Fatal Feminist*’s blog post, *Frumanista*’s title *Eyes up here, Pal*,<sup>292</sup> echoes *The Fatal Feminist*’s comment that:

If my hair distracts you so much, you are free to not look at it. As a matter of fact, the Qur’an advises you not to look at it. You have an obligation to lower your eyes.<sup>293</sup>

She closes the blog post by joking that she will assume that ‘any guy attempting to interrogate me about my hair is secretly madly in love with me’. In doing so, she makes extensive use of religious texts, but closes down the conversation when a male commenter begins to challenge her

<sup>288</sup> <http://www.fashion-isha.com/2014/04/on-trolling.html>. Retrieved 12 August, 2016.

<sup>289</sup> <https://mahamuslimah.wordpress.com/about-2/>. Retrieved 10 September, 2016.

<sup>290</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/scroll-up/>. Retrieved 28 September, 2016.

<sup>291</sup> <http://frumanista.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/neo-feminism-housewife-edition.html>. Retrieved 28 September, 2016.

<sup>292</sup> <http://frumanista.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/eyes-up-here-pal.html>. Retrieved 18 May, 2016.

<sup>293</sup> <https://thefatalfeminist.com/2011/08/16/why-dont-you-wear-hijab/>. Retrieved 5 June, 2016.

interpretation of the texts. Her authority as an interpreter of texts is at the forefront of many of the comments, including one from a young girl who asks her how to explain to her parents that she does not want to wear the *hijab*. *Nahida* has posted about only wearing the *hijab* to pray,<sup>294</sup> but that this may change, depending on the state of her relationship with her religious practice. She dismisses a male commenter (*Adnan*) who writes ‘I’m a man, and I would rather see a woman dressed modestly than one with a hijab and tight clothing. =)’ within a minute of him posting his comment with the response: ‘Uhm. It really doesn’t matter what you’d rather see. kthnxbie.’ Consequently, we see *Nahida* engaging with the women who comment on her post, but closes down the conversation when a male commenter begins to challenge her authority. Whether or not she also actively blocks them, as the blogging software allows her to do, is unclear. Such uses of authority are obviously successful within the context of the blog post (*Adnan* does not appear to post further comments), and *The Fatal Feminist* responds to the ongoing debates about *hijab* by offering her interpretation of religious texts as a further source of religious authority to support her argument.

Thus, online spaces can both be understood somewhere that women have the opportunity to negotiate potentially controversial aspects of their religious practice, and ones that need protecting and governing by women. Women are often targeted online by ‘trolls’, people who seek out arguments on the internet through inflammatory comments. Thus, similar incidents to the one one described above occur on Jewish blogs. Sometimes, blog posts that invite readers to discuss aspects of religious dress are targeted by trolls. In one such post, entitled *The Purpose Of Hair Covering – To Cover The Hair, Or To Be Aware?*, *Hadassah* asks her readers’ opinions regarding a point of religious dress practices based a recent experience:

I had a moment today where I got all panicked that I had left the house without covering my hair. I was sitting in the library and all of a sudden had the need to feel my head for a covering. Phew. I remembered, belatedly, that I had put on a fall this morning, one that is so light that it feels that it’s barely there.

...

Ok, so yeah, my hair is covered. But I momentarily forgot because my covering is so comfortable that I was unaware that I was wearing it.

Does this defeat the purpose of hair-covering? Is the mitzvah so that it is covered, or so that it is covered and I am aware every second that my hair is covered and I am a married lady?

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<sup>294</sup> <https://thefatalfeminist.com/2011/08/16/why-dont-you-wear-hijab/>. Retrieved 5 June, 2016.

<sup>295</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>. Retrieved 29 August, 2013.



Here, *Hadassah*'s lived experience is used as trigger for religious discussion. The reasons for hair covering outside the home explored, prompted by personal experience of forgetting her fall was there. Even though *Hadassah* has often alluded to living in an Orthodox community, she is turning to her online network as part of negotiating the meaning behind her religious practice. The online network is therefore a trusted source of information which she asks, rather than consulting offline hierarchical authorities (local rabbi) or online hierarchical ones; engaging in such discussions is part of enacting her online identity as a religious woman.

The contrast between the vagueness of *Hadassah*'s allusion to religious guidelines ('mitzvah') and the specificity of her question, suggests that the post is primarily aimed at other religious insiders. This post has, to date, attracted 42 comments. The commenters freely code-switch between English and Hebrew and Yiddish terminology, suggesting that they are either Jewish themselves or have particular interests in Jewish religious practices. There is a combination of male and female sounding aliases among the many comments. Most of these comments are polite in tone, in line with *Hadassah*'s specific request elsewhere that people commenting should:

Please play nicely and don't verbally attack in the comments. I reserve the right to edit comments for length, language and spelling.<sup>296</sup>

Vitaly, *Hadassah* has therefore seen, edited and approved all the comments. Beyond merely eliciting responses, she actively curates them. Consequently, she is, on a practical level, the gatekeeper of comments, but authority in online networks also works in more subtle ways than simply blocking or deleting offensive comments.

The comments sections to this post show a variety of different authority at work – predominantly women-led. The first comment, from *Lady Lock N Load*, is about the practical aspects of *Hadassah*'s post about religious dress, as she asks, 'Where did you get this wig that is so comfortable that you don't feel it's there? I would love to get one. thx!' *Hadassah* responds with 'it's actually a synthetic fall I picked up two summers ago from PaulaYoung.com'.<sup>297</sup> A consumer of the material goods that are needed for their shared religious practice, she is a trusted personal source of authority for wigs, helping another woman creatively conform, as discussed in Chapter Three.

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<sup>296</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/about/>. Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

<sup>297</sup> A 'fall' is a half-wig, where some hair is shown at the front. While some interpretations of *tzniut* argue that married women have to cover all their hair, less strict but still orthodox interpretations allow for a 'tefach', or handbreadth, of hair can be shown at the front of the head (Seigelshifer and Hartman, 2011:351). Thus, a 'fall' is a wig that covers all the hair at the back of the head; the transition is either styled, or covered by a hair band or a scarf. See for instance Goldberger, Frimet (2014). 'Taxonomy of a Sheitel'. *Forward*. 4 August. <http://forward.com/articles/203226/taxonomy-of-the-sheitel/>. Retrieved 1 September, 2016.

However, the rest of the examples from the comments section are related to the underlying challenges that women and other minority groups face on the internet. These are emphasised because discussing such matters online can be seen as transgressing symbolic boundaries between personal/private and modest/immodest.

Women's abilities to silence such comments are an indication of the various forms of authority the online space affords. In the comment section of *Hadassah's* post, a troll gets started. A commenter called *Druid*, writes:

Read לקט שכחת הפאה by Rabbi Wolpe. It explains the whole matter at great length. (And, satmar and eida charidis women shave their heads bald, hence the no slipping).& H, I understand that it is your blog, but posting a picture of yourself without a hair covering is rather tasteless.<sup>298</sup>

According to Herring et al (2002), ways of managing trolls include calling trolls out for breaching social norms. Here, the first instance of doing so is done by a seemingly male commenter, *Abe*, writes:

Druid, why would I consult a Conservative rabbi on an Orthodox matter? And I think you have a lot of hutzpa to be telling the blogger that posting her own picture is tasteless, but I guess on the internet any putz can hide behind a pseudonym and post obnoxiously.<sup>299</sup>

One of the ways in which such dissent, or trolling, is silenced in an online women's community is through showing female expertise about the matter at hand. Such ways of affirming female authority are demonstrated in this comments section, where *Lady Lock N Load* who writes that 'Some say that a woman is allowed to show a "tefach" of her own hair.' Additionally, *Gana* adds that:

To the person arguing with HaDassah about if she is covering or hair or not. She said she was. There needs to be no more argument after that. Stop being argumentative. If you don't agree with the way she covers, that's not up to you, that's between her, her husband and her rabbi. Give it a rest.

Shabbat shalom.<sup>300</sup>

Additionally, commenters use humour and sarcasm as ways of undermining the authority claimed by *Druid's* comment. For example *Echo*, who seconds *Abe's* description of *Druid's* behaviour as 'tasteless', writes that:

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<sup>298</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>  
Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

<sup>299</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>  
Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

<sup>300</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>  
Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

Except, she just said IN HER POST that it WAS covered. And since this picture was from today, I'm going to go CRAZY here and assume this is the picture she took while at the library, and posted on FB, with her musings on why covering is important, and since she already said she WAS in fact covered ... I find your comment quite tasteless on a few levels.<sup>301</sup>

Rooting the critique of *Druid's* comment as a misunderstanding the situation at hand, as well as suggesting that his comment is in breach of conventions of the online community, *Echo* thus undermines his authority as someone that should be listened to on several levels. As previously mentioned, *Hadassah* vets all comments. Reasserting ownership of the conversation, she responds:

Actually I am wearing it in the above picture. Not every fall is a band-fall. That you think I would uncover my hair to make a point on my blog is so tremendously insulting. Who are? YOU to judge ME?<sup>302</sup>

This becomes part of what is called the 'spiral of silence' on the internet, where one person outs the troll, others join in, and the troll is silenced. One commenter, *Aliza* (who blogs as *Memoirs of a Jewminicana*), asks 'Can we just block him?' Another, *Rubyv*, invokes feminist Rebecca Solnit's (2008) concept of 'mansplaining' (whereby men explain areas of women's expertise back to them), sarcastically stating that 'But Ali, watching him mansplain is amusing. I love mansplaining. It's awesome.' *Druid* is then explicitly outed as a troll, when *colloquiallyspeaking* writes that:

Ha! That Druid likes to stir up controversy – just did it on my blog the other day – I was Contemplating blocking him, but letting people expose themselves lets others make wiser decisions around them.<sup>303</sup>

Thus, the troll is silenced. The earlier attempt by *Abe* to assert his superior knowledge of religious texts is also undermined. The final comments on the post are all by women, and appear to be both reinforcing *Hadassah's* religious dress practices as well as her position as someone who has authority within her loose online network. The final comment on the blog post, posted by another writer also named *Hadassah*, reflects how these forms of religious authority, a combination of texts, structures and personal, can be combined online:

Very interesting question indeed and a very interesting discussion that came out of it. I personally think its a bit of both. Its like the mizvah not to mix dairy with meat. You should not do it because it is not allowed but it also has a deeper message behind. Not only do we slaughter the animal but after we have slaughter it we insult it my eating it with its mothers milk?! Thats just cruel! And that is why many choose not to.... If you feel that you

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<sup>301</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>. Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

<sup>302</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>. Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

<sup>303</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>. Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

need to have something helping you staying aware all the time of that you're a married woman and that you are modest then let that be your reason why you choose to follow this Mizvah. The important thing is that we follow them, for G-ds sake.

I think that you have found a great purpose nonetheless as to why any married woman should want to follow this Mizvah. It's like a mans kippah keeping him aware of the higher presence, so to speak.<sup>304</sup>

Vitaly, the second *Hadassah* notes that hair covering is a woman's *mitzvah*, but she also relates it to men's modesty. Through placing hair covering in the context of other religious practices, she demonstrates that online networks can offer support for an interpretation of physically enacted modesty that is primarily about the relationship between a woman and God, not simply as a way of managing relationships between the sexes. The association between women and practice, compared to men and learning, may be reinforced in such networks. However, there is also room for women to use both their mastery of the medium and of personal authority to direct the conversation and discuss their own interpretations of their practices.

Similar co-ordinations of different forms of religious authority on the Muslim blogs are also found on blogs such as *The Salafi Feminist*. There, the controversial nature of her combining Salafi religious interpretation, wearing the *niqab* and self-defining as feminist, invokes the ire of some commenters. These are, however, frequently silenced by commenters, especially ones with female-sounding names. These commenters are supportive of her, and she herself interjects in the comment section when there are egregious misunderstandings about her religious practice, though she in general does not engage with commenters that might be trolls.<sup>305</sup>

#### **4.8 Aggregation as a form of authority**

Such uses of authority, that stem directly from how the medium of blogs and of online activities do not fit easily within Campbell's schema of religious authority online (2007); it is both personal, but very similar to how secular women's groups silence trolls. Another form of authority that draws heavily on aspects of the underlying media. One of the features of internet mediated technology is that it makes it easy and inexpensive to aggregate and distribute a lot of different information. Within the limits set by a software service provider, and laws about copyright, bloggers can aggregate as many different viewpoints as they like. This does not easily fall under religious hierarchy, texts, ideology or personal forms of authority. A blog that functions as a resource of relevant information, even if the main focus is on first person narratives by the person who runs the

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<sup>304</sup> <http://hadassahsabomilner.com/the-purpose-of-hair-covering-to-cover-the-hair-or-to-be-aware/>. Retrieved 29 August, 2013.

<sup>305</sup> <http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.co.uk/p/on-being-salafi-feminist.html>. Retrieved 28 August, 2016.

blogs, can become an important hub within an online network. This sort of authority is less informed by offline ways of transmitting authority about religious concerns than any of the four forms of online religious authority Campbell's schema suggests. Instead, I argue that being an online resource for aggregating amusing or useful images, texts or videos is part of how authority is enacted online, lying somewhere at the intersection of texts, ideology and personal authority. However, rather than trying to shoehorn this phenomenon into Campbell's schema, it seems more fruitful to consider such vernacular authority is instead drawn from characteristics of the medium. Therefore, I suggest that it is a further example of mediatisation theories (Hjarvard, 2008), where the expression of religious practices are influenced by the logic of the medium. The latter does not only encourage a subjective and personal enactment, but also facilitates bringing together information. Conservative tendencies of the community can be reinforced without necessarily depending exclusively on traditional sources of religious authority, even traditional sources of authority that are online. For instance, under the tag 'Not-so traditional tradition', the blogger at *Yo Yenta* has compiled a collection of different sources of Jewish tradition, ranging from videos of Orthodox Jews doing parodies of pop songs, to ones by comedian Conan O'Brien.<sup>306</sup> One of the ways in which religious identities are enacted online is through aggregating popular images and texts ('memes'), demonstrating familiarity with such trends online. These do not, however, necessarily lead to greater secularisation as argued by Hjarvard (2008), but can instead be mutually reinforcing ethical communities (Lövheim, 2011), through which religious practice is enacted or mediated.

In keeping with the ways in which different forms of religious authority work together, such authority can be combined with appealing to more traditional forms of authority. For instance, *Chaviva at Kvetching Editor* ran a multi-part blog series which she dubbed *The Tzniut Project*, which I also discussed in Chapter Three. She writes that she started it after having asked other people on Twitter about the challenges she was having finding modest clothing in mainstream stores:

I want to start a series of Q&A posts with Jewish women who observe tzniut(modesty) and the stereotypes they face, the experiences they have, and everything about what it means to dress one way and have people perceive you in their own way. ...  
Are you interested in participating? Shoot me an email and the questions will be on their way. There are about 10 questions and you can take your time answering them. This is going

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<sup>306</sup> <http://www.yoyenta.com/category/tradition-tradition/>. Retrieved 8 September, 2016.

to be an ongoing series, and I will be doing minimal editing (only for my OCD grammar concerns) -- and most importantly, all posts will remain anonymous.<sup>307</sup>

This call for participation was obviously successful – the series ran to include 22 posts by women and 2 by men. There are also several comments saying that they would like to be included, though given that the final version of the project was anonymous, it is unclear whether or not these commenters finally did so.

The questions *Chaviva* asked her commenters include both practical and spiritual concerns and attract a range of responses. While I do not have access to how often they have been read, *Chaviva* currently has a tab on the top of her homepage to allow readers to access them directly. Beyond the comments on her blog, her occasional links to posts she has written about specific aspects of Jewish dress on online resources such as <http://judaism.about.com/>,<sup>308</sup> aggregating these sorts of narratives lends *Chaviva's* blog a form of authority drawn from the multiple voices she aggregates. The best example of this form of authority at work is that *Princess Leah* at *The Frumanista* chooses to cite *The Tzniut Project* when writing about what modesty means in her own life. Unlike *Chaviva*, *Princess Lea* is Frum From Birth or FFB – she is not a convert, but was instead born into her religious community, which, based on her frequent references to it on her blog, remains closely engaged with. However, when *Princess Lea* blogs about what *tzniut* means to her, she does not only, as I have mentioned above, reference rabbis, but also bases a her developing online enactment as a religiously dressed woman from responses to *The Tzniut Project*:

A few years ago Just Call Me Chaviva launched "[The Tzniut Project](#)," in which Jewish women of various hashkafos gathered to discuss what *tznius* means to them. Here's a sampling of responses from different contributors to her series when asked the question, "I say modesty or *tzniut* ... what does that mean to you?"<sup>309</sup>

*Princess Lea* follows this by quoting several different responses from *The Tzniut Project*, which presumably she finds particularly useful. All of the perspectives she quotes (from four different responders) emphasise the spiritual rather than material aspect of *tzniut*. Drawing on typical, though non-Jewish, fashionably modest women such as the Duchess of Cambridge and Audrey Hepburn, *Princess Lea* includes both a photo of the Duchess and an image that contains a quote by Hepburn that says 'Elegance is the only beauty that never fades'. Both the Duchess of Cambridge and Audrey Hepburn are found elsewhere in the Jewish blogging network as examples of women who

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<sup>307</sup> <http://mamaloshen.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/tzniut-project.html>. Retrieved August 3, 2016.

<sup>308</sup> For instance an article she wrote about the *tallit* or prayer shawl: <http://judaism.about.com/od/judaismbasics/fl/What-Are-Tzitzit-What-is-a-Tallit.htm>. Retrieved 6 September, 2016.

<sup>309</sup> <http://frumanista.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/what-it-means-to-me.html>. Retrieved 3 August, 2016. I have roughly translated *hashkafos* as 'communities' within Orthodox Judaism.



are both modestly dressed and still stylish, serving as an inspiration for *Sharon* at *Fashion-Isha* and her readers as well.<sup>310</sup> Additionally, the fact that *Princess Lea* posts this several years after *Chaviva* stopped updating *The Tzniut Project*, and the enduring popularity of images associated with the long-deceased Audrey Hepburn, suggests such forms of authority have greater longevity than might have been initially believed.

Aggregation of images and narratives as a form of online authority also occurs on the Muslim blogs. For instance, *Wood Turtle* ran a regular series of posts called *Muslim Roundup*, where she collated interesting, inspiring or infuriating links about Muslims and Islam online. She added her own interpretation to these posts regarding what or why was interesting or relevant about them. Furthermore, *Wood Turtle* was adept at collecting images, texts or short videos about Islam, as shown by her post *Beard memes and the proper hijab narrative*.<sup>311</sup> The influence of such posts and ways of enacting authority about religious practices through not only personal experiences but also an understanding of what is happening in the wider Muslim blogosphere, can be seen in the fact that other bloggers in *Wood Turtle's* network, such as *Orbala* have linked back to the post. This link back from *Orbala* was part of a post she herself wrote about *Hijab policing on the internet: images of how to wear the hijab 'correctly'*.<sup>312</sup> *Wood Turtle's* original post did not only attract 29 comments, multiple 'likes' and five star ratings, but was also posted on several other blogs, including aggregation blog *Muslimah Media Watch*. Links can suggest both attribution and endorsement, and the enthusiasm *Wood Turtle's* guest bloggers express when they are asked to be part are an indication of the popularity of her blog. *Nahida's* guest post *The Right of the Inquiring Feminine*, discussed above, garnered many more comments when on *Wood Turtle's* blog than when on her own, which can either be attributed to the different readerships or to overlapping networks. The reach of these blogging networks is also implied in the comments – my delineations of scope meant that I capped the number of Muslim blogs at just over 30. However, that is not only as many as might be represented in the comment section on a blog post such as this one, but also a deliberate limitation. For this post alone, the commenters are based in not only in North America but also in Dubai and Indonesia. Internet 'memes', as the images are described, become a useful way of discussing concerns about religious dress, giving a shared frame of reference to the group beyond the more traditionally religious ones they already share.

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<sup>310</sup> [http://www.fashion-isha.com/2015\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.fashion-isha.com/2015_02_01_archive.html). Retrieved 6 September 6th, 2016.

<sup>311</sup> <https://woodturtle.wordpress.com/2013/05/30/beard-memes-and-the-proper-hijab-narrative/>. Retrieved 2 August, 2016.

<sup>312</sup> <https://orbala.wordpress.com/2014/11/01/hijab-policing-on-the-internet-images-about-how-to-wear-the-hijab-correctly/>. Retrieved 2 August, 2016.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

Messy, diverse, unstructured and ever-evolving, the blogosphere is unlikely to result in clear divisions between the sorts of religious authority at work when women are enacting religious identities online. On the blogs I study, being a woman and being a modestly dressed religious person are mutually constitutive subjective experiences, which inform and reinforce each other – the potential gender considerations to online authority are thus worth investigating. For instance, my research suggests a greater acceptance of what is perceived as primary texts, such as the Quran and the Torah, as sources of authority, with less attention paid to written down oral traditions or interpretive texts such as the *Hadith*, the Talmud or other rabbinic texts. As I have shown, Campbell's 2007 schema of the different forms of religious authority online is a useful entry point for thinking about the various layers of authority. In most of the blogs, these different forms of authority are invoked. However, it appears that first person experiences, are a valid foundation for discussion about religious dress, but remain open to challenge from other sources of authority. Personal, gendered responses need not, however, lead to revisionism. Instead, the online space shows the importance of lived or vernacular religion. Constantly in flux, these bloggers draw on both traditional and new forms of religious knowledge in supporting and challenging orthodoxy, albeit within contexts they often consider conservative.



## 5 Conclusion: modest religious dress and gendered online identities

### 5.1 Doing a PhD in an emerging field

As discussed in my Viva, part of the challenge of doing this research was that it took place over a long period of time. Further, this research depended on primary sources that were emerging while I was writing, in a changing<sup>313</sup> medium and genre, where the secondary literature and intellectual frameworks were very far from maturity when I began my research. Consequently, much has changed since the early days of my PhD. While not always made explicit in the body of this thesis, these developments are reflected in my thinking. In this conclusion, therefore, I will begin by offering a discussion and critique of my three research questions, as an indication of how my thinking about modest religious dress and gendered online identities has developed over the past years. This is followed by an analysis of how and where my primary research, in light of the secondary literature I discussed in Chapter One, answers and modifies those questions. I then engage with Rosi Braidotti's work about the limitations of post-secular philosophies pertaining to women's rights, which is in turn an indication of potential future research, with implications for policymaking about the intersection between group rights and individual rights. I will then show future areas for research. These are, in part, based on my engagement with developing academic debates. For instance, as shown by the special issue of *New Media and Society* dedicated to methodological developments in Digital Religion studies, published early this year (Lövheim and Campbell, eds., 2017), there is an increasing emphasis on the interrelationship between people's offline and online lives when seeking to understand religion online. Similarly, the proliferation of social media platforms, many of which are primarily visual, since 2010 might also have a greater influence on religion online than is accounted for in this research, and which is in turn an interesting avenue for future research.

While making a virtue out of interdisciplinarity, my main contributions to knowledge fall in the fields of digital religion, religion and gender, digital humanities and fashion studies. My work contributes to conversations about how women's minority religious identities are enacted online,

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<sup>313</sup> For instance, Instagram, the photo- and video-sharing platform which has since become a significant part of visual representation online, had only just launched when I began my research in 2010, Streatfield, Beth, *The Telegraph*, 23 December 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/technology-video/12064686/Rise-of-a-tech-giant-the-history-of-Instagram.html>. Retrieved October 12, 2017. Snapchat, which has introduced ephemeral visual representation, would not launch for another year. Crook, Jordan and Escher, Anna, *TechCrunch*, October 15, 2015 <https://techcrunch.com/gallery/a-brief-history-of-snapchat/>. Retrieved October 12, 2017. Similarly, while qualitative research software such as NVivo existed when I began my research and data collection, it was not as widely adopted as it is today, and did not have as many features that make it easy to use as current versions do: <http://www.qsrinternational.com/about-us/history>. Retrieved October 12, 2017.

where the structures of formal authority offline are male-dominated, in the face of secular contexts that range from nonplussed to hostile about embodied religious practices. Furthermore, this research is an indication of how ‘lived religion’ can uphold seemingly conservative religious practices and gender roles. I agree with Lövheim (2016) and Turner (in Gorski, 2012) that the internet, possibly because of the lack of formal barriers to expression and of the emphasis on first-person narratives, seems particularly suited to an essentialist version of women’s religious practices. However, I strongly disagree with the latter’s argument that the (female) religious identities mediated through the internet are inherently superficial and fleeting. Such an argument sits within academic traditions that do not only have casually misogynist undertones, but have also been widely disproven. Women’s consumption and use of dress was long been understood as vicarious and superficial (Veblen, 1899), gender was long been an understudied part of religious studies, and, as Ammerman (2011) argues, the ‘narrative of loss’ that surrounds academic narratives of how religious practices are developing hinge on the illusory homogeneity of the past.

Thus, in contrast to Turner’s arguments, my work builds on and extends existing arguments about the importance of taking both dress (Wilson, 2003) and online networks (Piela, 2010) seriously as aspects of gender and of religious practices (Tarlo and Moors, ed., 2013). Such networks need not, however, be understood as inherently challenging the leadership of the religious communities the bloggers belong to. Instead, they can be interpreted as ways in which women’s religious practices are mediated and enacted, in ways that some of the bloggers consider feminist, but which do not. I argue that this is best understood as part of the ongoing negotiation of both the contemporary public sphere (Habermas, 2008) as well as part of the ongoing negotiation of how, or if, the internet is allowing for different boundaries of religious institutions to emerge (Hutchings, 2015). Such negotiations, however, need not change the binary gender roles that such religious institutions support and uphold, but can instead be part of upholding them in the face of technical developments.

## **5.2 Changing attitudes to terminology in research questions**

As discussed in Chapter One, this research was informed by three main research questions. Rather than having been decided before I began my primary research, or derived from my reading of secondary sources, the questions were drawn from early readings of the primary sources. I discussed my methodology for selecting the blogs that form the basis of this thesis in Chapter Two. Another possible methodological consideration would have been to use grounded theory explicitly (see for example Strauss and Corbin, 1997) as a framework for how to approach the sources, as well

as when to stop reading and beginning to write. If I were to begin the research again, I would have attempted to take a more quantitative approach to determining the questions, for example, as part of responding to question two, by mapping how many of the blogs included reference mainstream social mores. It would have been interesting to analyse the frequency of certain terms associated with women's religious dress (perhaps by using qualitative analysis software such as NVivo), both as part of determining research questions and as a complement to answering those questions.

Nevertheless, the research questions I *did* use helped me consider a series of multi-faceted phenomena about modest religious dress and gendered online identities. These research questions were:

- 1) Using modest dress as the focal point, how do Muslim and Jewish women in a North American cultural context use blogs to navigate their personal and religious self-identities?
- 2) What does this self-representation show about how female gender roles and minority religious practices are enacted in a secular or Christian setting?
- 3) What do these findings suggest about the intersection between conservative religious practices and the internet?

On reflection, these questions were more open-ended than I had intended. Questions one and two, especially, overlap extensively, as is indicated by my discussion of them, below. Answering both fully includes an understanding of secularism and the experience of belonging to a self-identified religious minority, as well acknowledging that religious dress is simultaneously part of enacting being a woman and an everyday part of religious practice. Similarly, questions one and three (especially) require a discussion of the intersection of religion, the secular and the internet. These overlaps are in part a reflection of the complexity of the sources, but also of trying to pack too many concerns into each question.

Beyond being open-ended and overlapping, these research questions use language that is less academically rigorous than I would choose today. For instance, as my thinking developed over the course of my PhD, I became increasingly uncomfortable with first question's underlying suggestion that the 'self' is sufficiently fixed to be 'navigated' or 'represented'. It suggests that aspects of identity, such as gender, are innate and permanent; a phrasing which no longer reflects my thinking. This shift is in part thanks to my reading of both Butler (2008) and Mol (2002) and the concomitant development in my understanding of how identity, gender and reality are performed or

enacted, as well as thanks to my reading about dress. Mol modifies Butler's understanding of gender articulation through emphasising a contextual rooting in the physical body, where gender is either in support of or in contrast to physical sex, requiring different forms of enactment depending on context. For Mol, being a woman in a public space requires different levels of articulation than enacting womanhood in a changing room; a distinction which proved a helpful way of approaching the need to articulate, online and in writing, physical gendered practices such as religious dress. Appadurai (1986), for instance, would argue that 'things' help us think, while Mol develops such arguments to collapse the subject/object divide. For Mol, 'reality' cannot be fully separated from objects. Instead, reality is enacted *through* objects, in ways that might seem to lack coherence but which do not descend into chaos. In the primary sources, the 'things' through which reality is enacted are dual, encompassing both religious dress and the disembodied materiality of blogs. However, while it is easy to be highly critical of one's past thinking, there is some indication in the research questions that I was beginning to question an understanding of the self that was intrinsic, namely the use of plural for 'identities' in question one, and of the use of the term 'enactment' in question two.

Another unhelpfully wide-ranging aspect of the questions is that they appear to not differentiate between, or within, the United States and Canada, the two North American countries used as the approximate geographic limitations of this research. Initially, as I discussed in Chapter Two, I found the vagueness of this geographic description useful, because it appeared to echo the slipperiness of the online sphere. Not only a representation of the ways in which the internet traverses national boundaries, which (as I discuss at the end of Chapter Four) reflects the international nature of the blogging networks, I initially believed that a resistance to rooting the blogging networks in specific offline contexts was an indication that they could be interpreted as a delocalised Third Space. The Third Space, characterised by hybridity resulting in creativity, is a concept I drew from Bhabha's (2004) work. During the course of my PhD, it has come to be developed as a framework for thinking about the internet (Hoover and Echchaibi, 2012, Kim, 2012). Additionally, delocalisation of both Judaism and Islam appeared to be an important consideration for approaching the primary sources (see Ahmed, 2011, on the emphasis on a global *ummah* in contemporary Islam), especially since such diasporic conditions have been associated with rapid adoptions of technology, ranging from tapes to the internet (Anderson, 1999, Echchaibi, 2011 and Shandler, 2009). However, since finishing my research, I have begun to question this reasoning. While I deliberately focused on the diasporic and geographically fluid nature of the online

networks, the differences (if any) between experiences of women whose offline contexts occur within the US ‘melting pot’ compared to the Canadian ‘mosaic’ would have been an interesting avenue for research. Such an investigation would also have to take into account the internal differences within both countries. For instance, it would have been worth investigating how or if being a Muslim woman living in Quebec, where the *niqab* was recently banned, would be different to living in a province where religious belonging was less of a political flashpoint.<sup>314</sup> While I lack conclusive data about how living in urban versus rural areas might affect how women write about religious dress and womanhood, I suspect there *would* be a difference between such settings. Here, I have not only been influenced by contemporary events, but also by reading Graham (2012), a geographer who argues that the use of spatial metaphors for the ‘online’ or ‘cyberspace’ has resulted in a failure to understand the ways in which the digital and the physical influence and mediate each other. Similarly, Kember and Zylinska (2012) argue that the use of spatial metaphors in studying online phenomena and tools has led to an underemphasis on the temporal, mediating aspects of ‘new’ media. Focussing on both the temporality of mediated religious practices, and the interrelationship between the offline and online, would be an interesting avenue for future research.

The research questions also suggest an elision of ‘North American cultural contexts’ with ‘secular or Christian’ settings. The phrase ‘secular or Christian’ was intended to reflect my reading of Asad (2003), where secularism and Christianity are described as being in constant negotiation with each other, as well as to acknowledge that both Canada and the United States are secular countries where Christianity, while in numerical decline as discussed in Chapter One, remains the dominant religion. While originally intended to leave space for interpretation, it may have inadvertently led to the ‘secular’ and the ‘Christian’ being conflated, especially since I did not study the bloggers’ offline contexts. It would have been more useful to describe the wider cultural context that these women live within as the ‘secular mainstream’. The term ‘mainstream’, which I use in Chapter Three, is an attempt to usefully simplify a complex reality. While inevitably inaccurate, given the diversity of thought, experiences and opinion among the ostensibly ‘mainstream’, the term does reflect the supposed homogeneity of attitude toward the experiences of religiously dressed women that the bloggers themselves often position themselves as responding to.

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<sup>314</sup> Kassam, Ashifa. The Guardian. October 18, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/quebec-passes-law-banning-muslims-from-wearing-face-coverings-in-public>. Retrieved October 22, 2017.

### 5.3 Hypotheses and conclusions

Despite the limitations of the phrasing of my research questions, they proved a useful basis for evaluating my reading of the primary sources and analysing what they tell us about blogging about modest religious dress and gendered online religious identities. This section is a discussion of each of the three questions in sequence, taking into account the existing literature, reviewed in Chapter One, and drawing on the analysis of primary sources I developed in Chapters Three and Four. Given the slightly overlapping nature of the research questions, which I discussed above, the boundaries between these responses are quite fluid.

My hypothesis for the first question was that blogging about religious dress is a women-led form of online self-representation; a way in which religious practices are enacted (Mol, 2002). Religious dress is a gendered part of everyday religious practice, and my thesis is part of arguing, with Woodhead (2007), Coakley (2000) and Ammerman (2011) that both gender and lived religion are important considerations for religious studies. Given both its subject matter and commitment to studying self-generated writing, this thesis is also part of arguing for taking online activity seriously as a subject for academic inquiry; an angle which was more controversial in 2010 than it is in 2017. In doing so, I build on Meyer's (2013) argument that media can occupy a formative role as a constitutive part of religion. Consequently, I agree with her, and with Mol (2002), that reality does not lie beyond representation but is instead constituted by it. Rather than depending on dress to be indicative of their internal states (including both religious beliefs and gender), Chapter Three demonstrates that for many bloggers, modest religious dress simultaneously constructs and reveals their identities as religious women. Additionally, blogging about religious dress may be part of how they subvert expectations of themselves as 'oppressed', expectations based on stereotyping or a perceived contrast between their dress and behaviours. Such expectations can come from colleagues, such as for *whyiwearhijab*, or from an unidentified audience, such as for *Confessions of a Subjugated Wife*. My research suggests that blogging about religious dress is part of how these women constitute their gendered religious identities, by adding a further, online dimension.

While social media activity is often still regarded as superficial or narcissistic, I instead consider it in the light of Charles Taylor's 'affirmation of ordinary life' (1989). As I discuss in Chapter Two, the blogs in the two blogging networks were ongoing, creative projects, often spanning several years, and (beyond religious dress) included subjects ranging from politics, to childcare and product reviews. While Taylor's tome was finished before the beginning of the World Wide Web in 1990, his concept of the 'affirmation of ordinary life', that one of the defining aspects

of Western civilisation is that ordinary, everyday life of individuals become suffused with religion-ethical meaning, provided a way of approaching these blogs. Combined with Joan Wallach Scott's (2009) argument that headscarves are transgressive in a French context because they affirm a different way of being a woman than what is acceptable to the French mainstream, Taylor (1989) gives an indication of why a seemingly minor aspects of religious practice, such as the dress worn by a small number of religious women, is both heavily present on the blogs and why it attracts a disproportionate amount of ire from the mainstream. Blogging about religious dress is both an aspect of sharing and enacting lived religion, and affirming a different 'ordinary life' than that of the secular mainstream, in a way that can be shared with readers and commenters from a variety of religious communities. Thus, the main conclusion I drew in response to the first research question was that *how* women write about religious dress is less important than *that* they do it.

The emphasis on women writing about themselves was intended as a counterpoint to how women who wear religious dress were (and are still) written *about* and portrayed; a perhaps too-literal interpretation of reclaiming the narrative. While some of the blogs I included had a more visual slant, the main focus of this project was on writing, especially that which is aimed at an online, interactive audience. Had I begun this research today, it is unlikely that I would have emphasised long-form texts at the expense of other, more visual forms of online media. Today, I would instead have looked at how women use a combination of different online platforms, including images, videos and illustrations to enact gendered religious identities. Such a proliferation of online platforms and genres as sites for enacting identity actually chimes even better with Mol's theory (2002) that enactment of reality is multifaceted (sometimes contradictory, but not chaotic), than does an exclusive focus on one form of expression, on one or two very similar online publishing platforms. The proliferation of smart phones in North America since I began my research has changed how many people access and use the internet.<sup>315</sup> Since it no longer requires an expensive computer, or the same facility and confidence with the written word, and posting writing, pictures or films to the internet can more easily be private, it will be interesting to see research about how this change in access is changing digital religion, perhaps as an extension of Miller's international *Why We Post* research series (2016).

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<sup>315</sup> Smith, Aaron. Pew Research Center. January 12, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/12/evolution-of-technology/>. Retrieved October 15, 2017. Poushter, Jacob. Pew Research Center. February 22, 2016. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/02/22/smartphone-ownership-and-internet-usage-continues-to-climb-in-emerging-economies/>. Retrieved October 15, 2017.

Nevertheless, looking at *how* women write about religious dress online also proved a fruitful line of inquiry, especially when comparing writing by Jewish and Muslim women. Muslim women's online worlds have become very well-documented in the last decade: searching for 'muslim women online' between 2010 and 2017 gives more than one hundred results on Google Scholar as of late 2017. Most of the academic research done into Jewish women's online presences is from an Israeli context, although new work by Neriya-Ben Shahr (2017) and Oren and Stadler's (2016) work about Chabad, indicates that there is an increase in academic attention toward Jewish online worlds. Comparisons, however, are surprisingly rare from a North American perspective, as I discussed in Chapter One, and is therefore part of my original contribution to knowledge. Taking a comparative approach could have led me to question what aspect of different religions can appropriately be compared. However, I chose to base my research on Asad's theory of religion (1983), where looking for a universal definition of religion is deemed to be of limited usefulness. Asad suggests that trying to find a cultural 'system' is a dead end, as we are restricted by our own perspectives. Instead, his work is more focused on power, control and practice. Combined with Obeyesekere's (2014) combination of a sensitivity to traditional interpretations of symbols while allowing for personal interpretation and experiences of them, Asad's focus on practices rather than on symbolic systems was the intellectual underpinning needed to justify focusing my research on observable phenomena, even when they were ones could be understood as being heavy with symbolic meaning. This proved intellectually liberating, as it prevented me from becoming distracted by the symbolism of dress, other than when the bloggers themselves alluded to such symbolism. Building on Asad's work drew me to focus on religions that emphasise the importance of religious practice, and on looking at writing about such practices online as an informal aspect of such practices. This was part of my justification for comparing work by Jewish and Muslim women, instead of also including blogging by Christian and Mormon women, despite the fact that women from these religions are also well-represented in blogging networks (Whitehead, 2015).

My research indicates that women from different communities, and indeed religions, comment on each other's posts about religious dress. I originally considered this to be an indication of the benefit of looking at women's religious dress through a wide, comparative religions, lens; an indication of shared experiences of being a member of a religious minority where modest dress is part of religious practice, in an otherwise secular context. It may, however, be the case that this phenomenon ought to be interpreted instead as an example of inter-denominational negotiation, to be understood alongside inter-faith discussions. Such nuance is lost through grouping women who



wear religious dress under the panoply of ‘conservative’. This is especially true since some of the women whose writing I study, such as *Kazemah*, believe that increased covering is a sign of greater piety. Others might instead acknowledge the existence of this standpoint but argue that for them, less covering, combined with a modest attitude is in line with the religious requirement for modesty, including bloggers such as *Sara*, who has stopped wearing the *hijab*.

Consequently, combining the different communities of Judaism and Islam the bloggers follow under the umbrella term ‘conservative religion’ might have been infelicitous. While it does have precedence in religious studies, predominantly as a description of Christian denominations that have a strong patriarchal bent and values associated with conservative politics (such as an emphasis on heterosexual marriage as an organising principle for religious communities, see Sherkat, 2000 and Tamney, 2002), ‘conservative religion’ is a somewhat outdated term and has not been in extensive academic use for the past decade. It may, for instance, have masked some of the diversity of religious belonging expressed by the women in the blogs. While the bloggers themselves will sometimes eschew labels, as being part of a distinctive branch of either Judaism or Islam, they do sometimes allude to differences between their offline communities. For instance, while there are extensive similarities between how they describe the role religious dress plays in their lives, the women who describe themselves as living within isolationist Hasidic communities in Brooklyn are navigating different offline contexts to those who have converted to Modern Orthodox Judaism. Similarly, Salafi bloggers could be understood as contending with different communities and pressures to women who are Quranists, not least because the latter may be considered heretical by many branches of Islam.

My developing considerations about using the term ‘conservative religion’ points to the challenge of finding over-arching terminology to describe religious practices and behaviours that appear to have more in common with each other than they do with the secular mainstream. Such similarities can be seen not only in shared concerns about modesty, dress and gender roles, but also more widely, in the facility with which some ostensibly ‘conservative’ religious groups have adapted internet-mediated technologies to work in their favour. Despite the occasional concerns about the perils of the internet, even ostensibly isolationist religious groupings have an engaged relationship with the internet, while simultaneously warning of its perils for believers. Beyond work by Piela (2010) and Bunt’s (2003) work about the *umma* online, which I discuss in Chapter One, it is worth considering the creative uses of the internet by Orthodox Jewish groups, including how Chabad uses the internet as a way of bringing Jews ‘back’ to Orthodoxy (Golan and Stadler, 2016,

Campbell and Golan, 2011 and Rashi and McCombs, 2015). While beginning to receive more academic attention, these are interesting avenues for future research.

As another aspect of question one (and implicit in question two), modest religious dress proved a useful focal point, because it is a shared concern between the Muslim and Jewish women whose writing I study, and a point of difference between them and the secular mainstream, where dress might reflect values related to gender and beauty standards, but which are not necessarily imbued with explicit religious meaning. My primary research showed women writing about religious dress as a response to a secular Other, refuting stereotyping through drawing on their own lived experiences of wearing religious dress and of its role in their own religious practices. ‘The media’, and its two-dimensional portrayals of religiously dressed women oppressed by male authority figures, is often used as a stand-in for ‘the mainstream’ on the blogs. It is portrayed as homogenous in its negative reporting of women’s religious dress and of life in isolationist religious communities, and as demonstrating limited understanding of the complexities of how religious women live and enact differently religious identities. Notably, ‘even’ bloggers who live in religious communities that might consider the internet a contested tool, such as Hasidic blogger *RFiedler*, do not only have a sophisticated understanding of how media narratives are constructed and shifted, but also indicate that neither religious leaders nor the media accurately portray the lives and concerns of women like her. The bloggers might express irritation with what they perceive as an excessive interest in their religious dress from secular media and politicians, but they nevertheless post counter-narratives, ensuring that there is an ongoing emphasis on religious dress in the blogging networks I study, beyond its obvious theological importance.

In a result that serves as an answer both to questions one and two, navigating personal and religious self-identities in the blogging networks I study, therefore, often means having an opinion about religious dress that is different to the secular mainstream. This was notable even among the women who no longer themselves wore religious dress. While they might have chosen to stop or change that part of their religious practice, they were often adamant that it is part of some people’s religious practice, but that they themselves no longer consider it to be necessary. There were some exceptions to this rule, such as *Sober Second Look*, but others such as *American Muslimah*, *Sara* and *Frida* seemed to confirm it. As I discuss in Chapter Three, some explicitly seek to dispel stereotypes about women who wear religious dress, such as *Amara’s Hijab Project* or *Jew in the City*, while others are more interested in sharing how religious dress fits within their own practices, of reviewing modest dress or linking to online stores. Beyond addressing stereotypes, there is also a

strand of deliberately subverting narratives about religiously dressed women as meek and oppressed, both ones that might stem from the mainstream media, or from patriarchal religious figures within their own communities. An ongoing emphasis on the blogs is that religious dress is something that is done for religious reasons, not exclusively to conform, for style or to protect oneself from the male gaze. That the male gaze and community censure is part of the concerns that inform religious dress does, however, occasionally surface on the blogs, such as from *Scarf Ace*'s posts discussed in Chapter Three or in some of the comments to *Hadassah* discussed in Chapter Four. Nevertheless, the language of choice, and an emphasis on the importance of men lowering their gazes and of the meaning of modesty for men, is a very common narrative device on both the Muslim and Jewish blogs.

As indicated in the previous section of this chapter, both research questions one and two require a discussion of the nature of secularism and secularisation. Much of my work hinged on the concept that secularism in North America was closely informed by Christianity. While Canada (as I discuss in the Introduction) is also the site of populist controversies about Muslim women's religious dress, the emphasis on dispelling stereotypes by women who describe themselves as living in the United States suggests that, even before the Trump administration, that being a woman who wears religious dress can be understood as a stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1963). This may have been, as I discussed above, because none of the Canadian Muslim bloggers seemed to be based in Quebec. It is also worth considering such dispelling of stereotyping and an emphasis on choice by Muslim bloggers in light of Ahmed's (2011) discussion of the *hijab* having different meaning in different contexts, an argument which seems to support Douglas's (1982) argument that certain religious practices can take on a greater importance in a diasporic setting. It may be understood here as an expression of wanting to be visibly Muslim, and be experienced as being compatible with other aspects of what Ahmed identifies as an emergent American Islam, where organisations such as Islamic Society of North America have seen female leaders.<sup>316</sup> While there is not enough evidence in the primary sources to draw a firm conclusion about how Islam is developing in North America, it would appear that such an Islam might accommodate for women's religious dress within a framework of 'choice' and as part of both a conscious and unconscious technique of the body (Mauss, 1935), which helps render it modest and thus religiously adherent. Additionally, given that the United States has the largest Jewish population outside of Israel, it would have been worth considering whether or not at least some urban, East Coast interpretations of American secularism

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<sup>316</sup> "About Dr. Ingrid Mattson." <http://ingridmattson.org/about/>. Retrieved October 23, 2017.

could be said to be in dialogue with Judaism as well as Christianity. Certainly, some of the Jewish bloggers appeared to be defining their religious dress practices in contrast to their secular upbringings and against beliefs held by more secular Jews, especially perhaps *Allison's* blog *Jew in the City*. Indeed, this is worth considering in the context of Rubel's (2009) argument that a preoccupation with Orthodoxy in the arts is a manifestation of anxiety about religion-ethnic identity among secular American Jews.

My second hypothesis, in response to the second research question, was that writing about religious dress is part of how women 'do' religion, that enacting religious femininity could be done both through the religious dress these women wear and the blogs they use to write about their modest dress practices and concerns. Beyond the understanding of gender enactment I drew from Butler (2008) and Mol (2002), this hypothesis was informed by Avishai's analysis (2008) of how women's practices of *niddah*, ritual purity allows for an understanding of agency that does not depend on choice. I sought to apply Avishai's intellectual framework to a different aspect of gendered religious practices (religious dress) and to online writing rather than ethnographic fieldwork. Avishai's emphasis on practice meant that I could address the challenges posed by the wide understandings of what 'choice' appears to mean in these blogging networks. As shown in my discussion above, it was evident that the language of 'choice' was an important way in which the bloggers demonstrated that their religious dress practices were benign and empowering. This way of writing about religious dress was frequently positioned contrast to secular dress practices for women (which for converts included themselves before conversion), or in tacit acknowledgement that other women may not have chosen to wear religious dress. However, community pressures to wear religious dress, or the appropriate kind of religious dress, are clearly not entirely absent, as discussed in both Chapter Three and Chapter Four. As I show both in my discussion of *One Chinese Muslimah's* blog and of *Hadassah's* comments about other women's dress as well as the ways in which her own adherence to head covering is questioned, the bloggers themselves can both be the recipients and the instigators of this sort of pressure. Additionally, while popular on the blogs, the language of 'choice' seems ill-suited to the fulfilling of religious dicta. Such a choice is perhaps better understood as a shorthand for making repeated decisions to wear religious dress based on interpretations of religious texts (either by women writing about their experiences or, often, male religious authority figures), rather than something which is forced upon them by male family or community members.

The implication, here, was that religious dress is part in both enacting both gender and religious personhood, even in an online space. This emphasis on the importance of maintaining a gender binary, with clearly assigned gender roles, is a distinctive and frequent feature of the blogging networks I studied. Dress and modesty are help uphold this structure, as is a preoccupation with religiously sanctioned heterosexual marriage. This is sometimes combined with the bloggers self-identifying as feminist, while some bloggers reject secular feminism as insufficient or unnecessary. While there is room for differing and changing opinions on the blogs, the responses from the network are almost always often supportive of religious dress, both when the topic in the original post is about which colour of skirt to wear, or even when it includes potentially controversial topics such as parents dressing young girls in religious dress.

Being a woman who blogs about religious dress also, based on the primary sources, means writing supportively to other women who wear religious dress. This is even true when the other women belong to a different religion, as shown in my analysis in Chapter Three of the discussion of *hijabi Saada's* guest post on *Culturally Hybrid Confession's* blog. Such an analysis also supports Arthur W. Frank's (2013) argument that we tell stories for each other as much as for ourselves, lending the act of sharing experiences a moral dimension. While this moral dimension is not strictly speaking a religious one, it can be understood within the context of Jewish women acting as defenders of religious practices, if not religious interpretation (of, for example, religious texts) as described by Fader (2009), as well as the practice of *da'wa*, which Ahmed describes as part of the Muslim Brotherhood encouraging women to influence other women toward what is understood to be greater piety in dress. Blogging about religious dress is thus done in dialogue with commenters, as a way of negotiating one's own dress practices and as a way of supporting others.

Seemingly in contrast, the limitations of understanding dress as a set of semiotic devices (critiqued, for instance, by McCracken, 1990) is a concern which is frequently alluded to on the blogs. The seeming tension between, on the one hand, the argument that the communicative aspect of religious dress is an insufficient indicator of someone's piety, and on the other hand, the establishment of women as experts in exemplifying and encouraging enactment of gendered religious identities through dress and blogging about dress, surfaces on the blogs. Such a tension does not appear to be understood as contradictory, especially as hostile discussions of someone's (inexpert?) religious dress are conceived of as being slanderous *gheeba* among the Muslim women or *lashon hara* among the Jewish women and can therefore be dismissed. This appears to be the case when women's religious dress practices are questioned or criticised by men or male-sounding

aliases, as I discuss at length in Chapter Four, regarding how trolling is addressed both by *Nahida* of the *Fatal Feminist* and by *Hadassah* and her online network in the comment section of *In the Pink*. Additionally, *Chaviva's Tzniut Project* includes a question asking whether or not people can accurately tell the respondent's religious observance from their dress, which is often answered in the negative. However, while this unwillingness to stereotype according to religious practices online is laudable, it is worth considering that this might be a reaction against gossip and criticism in the women's offline communities, as suggested by the invocations against such behaviour by bloggers such as *Sharon* at *Fashion-Isha*.

One of the shortcomings of my research is that I did not give sufficient attention to the roles that fashion and shopping blogs have in these networks. Part of the reason for this may have been a slight concern about the term 'fashion'. As Kawamura (2004) argues, fashion can be understood as time-bound and fleeting, considerations which shows some of the bloggers claiming that their dress is a rejection of such concerns, a phenomenon which Tarlo and Moors (2013), drawing on Hebdige's work on subcultures (1970), describe as 'anti-fashion'. Such rejection, where it does occur, need not fully include a rejection of consumerism. As I argue in Chapter Three, *RFiedler* shows that religious dress, and shopping for religious dress, can be understood as a fun and easy way of being religiously observant. This is similarly expressed on blogs such as *Fashion-Isha*, where *Sharon* shares both weight loss tips and fashion advice. Additionally, Muslim style blogs, such as *hijabtrendz*, feature a combination of opinion pieces about issues facing *hijabis* and about *hijabs* that readers can buy. Similarly, *Mimu Maxi*, an online fashion store run by two Hasidic sister-in-laws, explicitly positions their minimalist, over-sized dresses as both something they sell, and as part of enacting Jewish religious law.<sup>317</sup> Such an intersection between consumption and femininity does not appear to be seen as problematic (Marwick, 2013). While this is especially true for blogs that are explicitly related to shopping, such as *hijabtrendz*, there is no obvious censure about *Chaviva* at *Kvetching Editor* reviewing modest swimwear.

At the intersection of being a woman and being religious (question two), body and sexuality appear to be more challenging topics on the blogs. Casanova's work (2011) about secularism dividing religion into private spheres was very helpful as a way of thinking about how the internet (transgressively) blurs the separation of domestic and public spheres, a transgression highlighted when women use the internet to navigate their religious and gender identities. Blogging is, as Serfaty (2004) presciently stated, a way of writing the self into existence in a public but personal

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<sup>317</sup> <https://www.mimumaxi.com/pages/who-we-are>. Retrieved October 21, 2017.

sphere. Vitaly, while blogging about dress there is rarely any mention of it being used to enact sexiness, even among women who are married, with *Orthofeminist*'s question of whether or not is is modest to be seen in a dressing room by a gay man a rare exception. Instead, dress is often described in terms of beauty, elegance, appropriateness or comfort. While sex is a part of many of the bloggers' lives, as evidenced by references to pregnancies and subsequent children, it is rarely discussed on these blogs. While, as *Princess Lea* at *Frumanista* implies, blogging about modesty might itself be considered immodest, writing about sex is definitely so, to the extent that *Nice Jewish Girl* goes to great lengths to disguise her identity. The body matters at this intersection of being a woman and being religious, but is also elusive: in the blogs, it is largely mentioned in diets, like in *Redefining Beauty Reflections*, when it is unhealthy, such as from *Memoirs of a Jewminicana* or pregnant and nursing, or in making it beautiful through modest dress. Nevertheless, in itself, it is more rarely discussed than I would have expected when formulating research question two.

While the third question might read as being the least specific ('What do these findings suggest about the intersection between conservative religious practices and the internet?'), it had the clearest hypothesis. This was that I would see a cross-religious similarity between the blogging about religious dress by women, which would suggest similarities both of experiences as being members of a religious minority, as well as an indication of how, if at all, such religions are changing due to the influence of the internet. Some of my responses to this question are alluded to above; women supporting each other in their religious dress practices, being able to buy and review religious dress regardless of location, and the existence of a public sphere which allows women to establish themselves as experts in this area of gendered religious practice. Recognising that this was still too wide-ranging a question, especially given the sample size and my methodology, I instead chose to focus on how religious authority was transmitted in these online networks when responding to this question. While informed by male structures, authority is shown to be primarily transmitted in negotiation with other women, as I discussed in Chapter Four. This is part of my original contribution to knowledge, as authority in online religious networks is understudied.

I based my analysis of online authority on my reading of Campbell's 2007 schema. This schema includes four forms of authority: religious hierarchy, religious structures, religious ideology and religious texts. Blogging about religious dress shows women's dress practices to be informed by multiple sources of authority, some of which appear to be especially informed by the underlying logic of the online, first-person media. Not only does this reinforce the bloggers' own insistence that religious dress should be understood as something worn primarily as part of their relationship with

God (within the context of male-dominated *religious hierarchies*), as enacting religiously modesty, which calls into question findings from France's Stasi Report (as discussed in Chapter Two) and subsequent legal emphases on the role of men in governing religious dress. As discussed in Chapter Four, my use of Campbell's schema indicates a greater cross-religious similarity in use of sources of authority than Campbell finds. I suggest this might be the result of inconsistencies in Campbell's methodology, as she uses different sorts of communities (one online, the others offline) as representative for the different religions. Most of these forms of authority were seen to be at work in the blogs, with very little difference between how Muslim or Jewish women used them, with the exception of Muslim women being more likely to use religious texts as a form of authority. Adding nuance to arguments by Okin (1999) about group rights being potentially oppressive to concerns of individual religious women, and to ones by Braidotti (2009) about both sexism being an inherent aspect of monotheism which can be countered by an oppositional, feminist mindset, I discuss examples in Chapter Four where critiques of certain male expressions of religious authority are voiced on the blogs, without resulting in categorical rejections of either their rulings or of such sources of authority. This is not only an indication of the messiness and seeming contradictions inherent in enactments of reality (especially ones developing over a longish period of time). It also demonstrates how such tensions can also be understood as a way in which the underlying medium influences enactment (Hjarvard, 2008). An informal, personal medium such as blogs lends itself to informal, personal authority, rather than the rigours and formality of textual analysis and religious hierarchy.

Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that I found less use of religious texts as a source of authority than I had believed would occur, based on my reading of feminist critiques of religion. When religious texts were used as sources of authority, there was a clear emphasis on the importance of the Quran or Torah above oral traditions. Nevertheless, such authority was used sparingly by women on the blogs as a way of resolving arguments, suggesting a discomfort with using texts as a form of authority, rather than a source of inspiration and of comfort. While some women, such as *Wood Turtle*, use religious texts as ways of lending authority to arguments about religion and gender, the greater frequency with which male-sounding commenters invoke religious texts is an indication that using religious texts may have masculine overtones. Furthermore, the conversations and debates that arise are rarely fully resolved on the blogs. This might be influenced by the medium, or be due to the expressed unwillingness by the bloggers to position themselves as religious hierarchical authority figures.



The second reason for focusing on the interactions of different forms of authority online is that it challenges assumptions in academia and isolationist religious communities alike about how religion is influenced by the internet. There is heavy emphasis on bloggers' personal authority, reinforced by a range of responses to hierarchy, ideology and texts. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter Four, my research suggests that forms of authority or knowledge including skill at aggregating interesting information and actively managing the online network are worthy of consideration when we discuss the forms of religious authority emerging online. As argued above, I believe that such experiences should not be dismissed as frivolous or superficial. The (admittedly small sample) of women who describe themselves as having converted as a result of having been drawn to religious dress indicates the importance that such experiences, both of dress and of blogging about it, can have on people's lives. The ongoing nature of blogging projects about religious dress also seems to counter such a suggestion. Such results demonstrate how mediating religious practices through the internet may, as Lövheim (2016) suggests, be allowing for different, feminine forms of religious authority to emerge. While Lövheim (2016) expresses a hope that women's online activities might lead to an opening or changing of religion, I am more inclined to believe that the response to the emergence of women's authority online (especially from within ostensibly isolationist communities which maintain a strict gender binary), is more likely to lead to a greater sacralisation of women's lives, in the model of North American Orthodox Judaism (Fishman, 2001). While I agree with such an analysis, it is worth adding a note of caution regarding the extent to which such sacralisation and feminine authority might be understood as 'new': certainly, many of these bloggers perceive their religious practices and online enactments to be within the confines of religious orthodoxy, rather than a challenge to it.

#### **5.4 Responding to feminist critiques of the postsecular turn**

As discussed in Chapter One and throughout this conclusion, my analysis of the primary sources depends heavily of the post-secular interpretive framework developed by Mahmood (2005) and further elaborated by Avishai (2008). At a later stage of my research, I was also influenced by Avishai, Gerber and Randles' discussion (2013) of what they describe as 'the feminist ethnographer's dilemma'; doing research within communities that reject the progressive agenda the ethnographer espouses. The blogging networks I study are, as I have discussed above, less consistent in their rejection of the intersectional, secular third wave feminism that I advocate for, than is the case in Avishai, Gerber and Randles's field sites. While some of the women whose writing I study reject secular feminism, others embrace it. Nonetheless, the potential accusation of politically correct apologism (Lazreg, 2009), where feminist progress is sacrificed for fear of

appearing xenophobic, is never far away for a feminist researcher whose analysis indicates that she disagrees with the wholesale application of Western, secular feminism.

While more nuanced than Lazreg, Braidotti (2008) is also critical of the postsecular turn in feminism. Though critical of the ‘visceral reaction’ against (what term does she use?) religious practices by an unholy alliance of secular feminists and neoconservative politicians, especially ones which single out Islam for criticism and attack, Braidotti suggests that the postsecular turn in feminism risks undermining, or even sacrificing, the incomplete progress of secular, Western feminism in its attempt to accommodate for difference. Although Braidotti acknowledges that postcolonial and black feminists have not been as explicitly anticlerical as many white, Western feminists, she chooses to not investigate this further. The failure to include the concerns of women of colour is, of course, a well-established shortcoming of Western feminism, which in turn echoes the failures of campaigning first-wave feminists from incorporating the concerns of working class women as part of the movement for formal citizenship rights. It strikes me as no accident that, as Braidotti states, black and post-colonial feminists have been more equivocal in their condemnation of religion, given the role played by religious organisations in social justice movements. The complexity of intersectionality as both a fragmented movement for social change, and a route of intellectual inquiry, renders an outright dismissal of one such identity marker and aspect of community undesirable. To borrow a phrase from software development, such an ambivalence is a feature of intersectional feminism, not a bug. It should not, therefore, be alluded to as a shortcoming, but instead be understood within the wider context of third wave feminism.

Part of the argument made in this thesis, both explicitly in Chapter One and implicitly throughout, is that the concerns of religious women are underserved by secular feminisms, and should be taken seriously. In doing so, I reject, with Mahmood, Braidotti’s argument that the only way in which feminism can continue to be a campaigning force is through a rejection of clericalism, a revisionist approach to religious texts, and a quixotic-seeming call for solidarity with non-human actors. Instead, I argue, rather than understanding agency as the subversion of religious orthodoxy, third wave feminists have a duty to examine how and why what might be perceived as oppressive gender roles, can be experienced as liberating. This may, in turn, force us to acknowledge, with Asad (1983), the limitations our own perspectives place on our abilities to interpret seemingly symbolic practices by those whose concerns and daily lives are different to ours. This need not, however, lead to a paralysis of action. Instead, as Habermas argues, such negotiations and re-negotiations are part of how the public sphere is governed. Beyond legitimate concerns about the

role of interference and nudging from governments, platforms and advertisers alike, the internet is, at least for now, one sphere in which such negotiations can still take place.

### **5.5 Future avenues for research**

In doing so, future research would, seek to be more specific about the interaction between the online and offline. While I still believe that online sources are worth serious academic inquiry, and that the differences in mine and Campbell's (2007) results indicate the need for methodological sensitivity around approaching these sources, the proliferation of smartphones in the past decade in both Canada and the United States has added further weight to the argument that the offline and online are best understood in dialogue with each other. Doing so would also lead to greater specificity of how members of diasporic communities interact not only with each other but also with their offline (secular) contexts, taking into account the differences and similarities not only between Canada and the United States, but also the internal differences within both countries. Additionally, while challenging, drawing away from spatial metaphors might be an interesting way of approaching the sources, especially for research focused on online enactments of ethical uses of time in both Judaism and Islam (Goldberg, 2000, El Guindi, 2008).

As mentioned above, future research would not only benefit from a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to both data collection and analysis. It would also gain from the inclusion of a variety of media and forms of representation as part of how online gendered identities are enacted. The approaching ubiquity of smartphones may be lowering the barrier to entry (both in terms of cost, ease of access and literacy levels) for accessing the internet, which will in turn be an interesting area for future research, especially regarding how isolationist religious communities contend with this potential challenge. As suggested by my results, which indicate similarities between how authority functions in online networks led by women from different religious communities, a comparative approach between religious groups is very helpful for doing such research, since it highlights the interaction between technology, individuals and religious practices.

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# Appendix one: primary sources

## Muslim blogs

This is a list of the Muslim blogging network that was part of the primary sources for this thesis. The list shows the addresses of the blogs from 2012, whether or not they were still online in 2016, if they had been updated in the last 12 months, and whether the blogger self-identified as a convert to Islam.

Blog Addresses	Online in 2016?	Updated in last 12 months?	Convert?
1. <a href="http://woodturtle.wordpress.com/">http://woodturtle.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Yes, twice	Y
2. <a href="http://amuslimahwrites.wordpress.com/">http://amuslimahwrites.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Yes, to close blog	N
3. <a href="http://orbala.blogspot.com/">http://orbala.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	No, moved blog	N
4. <a href="http://islam-and-gender.blogspot.com/">http://islam-and-gender.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	N
5. <a href="http://www.igotitcovered.org/">http://www.igotitcovered.org/</a>	Y	N	mixed
6. <a href="http://musfem.wordpress.com/">http://musfem.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	mixed
7. <a href="https://qattheworld.wordpress.com/">https://qattheworld.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
8. <a href="http://organicmuslimah.blogspot.com/">http://organicmuslimah.blogspot.com/</a>	N	N/A	N
9. <a href="http://www.shalom2salaam.com/">http://www.shalom2salaam.com/</a>	Y	N	Y
10. <a href="http://ilovehishmatheblog.blogspot.com/">http://ilovehishmatheblog.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	Y
11. <a href="http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/">http://coveredmuslimgirl.blogspot.co.uk/</a>	Y	N	Y
12. <a href="http://sunnisideup.com/">http://sunnisideup.com/</a>	N	N	N/A
13. <a href="http://luckyfatima.wordpress.com/">http://luckyfatima.wordpress.com/</a>	P	N/A	N/A
14. <a href="http://unearthing4deen.wordpress.com/">http://unearthing4deen.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	N	N
15. <a href="http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmmw/">http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmmw/</a>	Y	N	mixed
16. <a href="http://muslimah.femagination.com/">http://muslimah.femagination.com/</a>	Y	N	Y
17. <a href="http://muslimahamerican.com/">http://muslimahamerican.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
18. <a href="http://iamericanmuslimah.wordpress.com/">http://iamericanmuslimah.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	N	Y
19. <a href="http://mahamuslimah.wordpress.com/">http://mahamuslimah.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
20. <a href="http://invisiblemuslimah.blogspot.ca/">http://invisiblemuslimah.blogspot.ca/</a>	Y	Y	N
21. <a href="http://1beautyofislam.blogspot.com">http://1beautyofislam.blogspot.com</a>	Y	N	N
22. <a href="http://www.revealingyourself.com/">http://www.revealingyourself.com/</a>	N	N/A	N
23. <a href="http://furiouslyfabmuslima.blogspot.com">http://furiouslyfabmuslima.blogspot.com</a>	Y	No	Y
24. <a href="https://sobersecondlook.wordpress.com/">https://sobersecondlook.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
25. <a href="http://www.withloveleena.com/">http://www.withloveleena.com/</a>	Y	Y	N
26. <a href="http://scarfacewearingaheadsscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/">http://scarfacewearingaheadsscarfinamerica.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	N
27. <a href="http://www.hijabtrendz.com/">http://www.hijabtrendz.com/</a>	Y	Y	N/A
28. <a href="http://www.thehijabproject.org/">http://www.thehijabproject.org/</a>	Y	Y	N/A
29. <a href="https://islamwich.com">https://islamwich.com</a>	Y	N	Y
30. <a href="http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/">http://redefiningbeautyreflections.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	Y
31. <a href="https://thefatafeminist.com/">https://thefatafeminist.com/</a>	Y	Yes, to close blog	N
32. <a href="http://www.altmuslimah.com/">http://www.altmuslimah.com/</a>	Y	Y	N/A
33. <a href="http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/">http://onechinesemuslimah.blogspot.co.uk/</a>	Y	Y	Y
34. <a href="https://kazemah.wordpress.com/">https://kazemah.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
35. <a href="http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.co.uk/">http://thesalafifeminist.blogspot.co.uk/</a>	Y	Y	N

## Jewish blogs

This is a list of the Jewish blogging network that was part of the primary sources for this thesis. The list shows the addresses of the blogs from 2012, whether or not they were still online in 2016, if they had been updated in the last 12 months, and whether the blogger self-identified as a convert to Judaism.

Blog addresses	Online in 2016?	Updated in last 12 months?	Convert?
1. <a href="http://www.fashion-isha.com">http://www.fashion-isha.com</a>	Y	Y	N
2. <a href="http://frumfemale.blogspot.com/">http://frumfemale.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	Y	N
3. <a href="http://lifeaftersterncollege.blogspot.com">http://lifeaftersterncollege.blogspot.com</a>	Y	N	N
4. <a href="http://la-poutine-cachere.blogspot.com">http://la-poutine-cachere.blogspot.com</a>	Y	N	N
5. <a href="http://subjugatedwife.blogspot.com">http://subjugatedwife.blogspot.com</a>	Y	N	N
6. <a href="http://ontheedge-jewishblog.blogspot.com/">http://ontheedge-jewishblog.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
7. <a href="http://www.alizahausman.net/">http://www.alizahausman.net/</a>	Y	Y	N
8. <a href="http://frumanista.blogspot.com">http://frumanista.blogspot.com</a>	Y	Y	N
9. <a href="http://ablobofsomethingdifferent.blogspot.com">http://ablobofsomethingdifferent.blogspot.com</a>	Y	Y	N
10. <a href="http://frumfemale.blogspot.com/">http://frumfemale.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	Y	N
11. <a href="http://www.yoventa.com">http://www.yoventa.com</a>	Y	Y	N
12. <a href="http://hasidismandlit.blogspot.co.uk/">http://hasidismandlit.blogspot.co.uk/</a>	Y	Y	N
13. <a href="http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.com/">http://crazyjewishconvert.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
14. <a href="http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/">http://www.kvetchingeditor.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
15. <a href="http://shrimpkind.blogspot.com/">http://shrimpkind.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	N
16. <a href="http://www.ovvycartoons.com/">http://www.ovvycartoons.com/</a>	Y	N	N
17. <a href="http://rechosen.blogspot.com">http://rechosen.blogspot.com</a>	Y	N	N/A
18. <a href="http://redefiningrebbetzin.wordpress.com">http://redefiningrebbetzin.wordpress.com</a>	Y	Y	Born Reform, now Modern Orthodox
19. <a href="http://baalteshuvablog.wordpress.com/">http://baalteshuvablog.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y (aggregation site)
20. <a href="http://starofdavida.blogspot.com/">http://starofdavida.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	N
21. <a href="http://amiafrumfeminist.blogspot.com/">http://amiafrumfeminist.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	N
22. <a href="http://mykosherkitchen-allyson.blogspot.com/">http://mykosherkitchen-allyson.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	Y
23. <a href="http://modestlyfashioned.blogspot.com/">http://modestlyfashioned.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	Y	N
24. <a href="http://feministfreedomofspeech.blogspot.com">http://feministfreedomofspeech.blogspot.com</a>	P	N/A	N/A
25. <a href="http://fromtherib.wordpress.com/">http://fromtherib.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	N	N
26. <a href="http://thinkingjewgirl.blogspot.com/">http://thinkingjewgirl.blogspot.com/</a>	P	N/A	N/A
27. <a href="http://alta-b.blogspot.com/">http://alta-b.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	Y	N
28. <a href="http://badforshidduchim.wordpress.com/">http://badforshidduchim.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Yes, to say she's engaged	N
29. <a href="http://conservadoxandsingle.blogspot.com">http://conservadoxandsingle.blogspot.com</a>	Y	N	N but raised less observant
30. <a href="http://culturalhybridconfessions.wordpress.com">http://culturalhybridconfessions.wordpress.com</a>	Y	N	N
31. <a href="http://www.jewinthecity.com/">http://www.jewinthecity.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
32. <a href="http://shomernegeiah.blogspot.com/">http://shomernegeiah.blogspot.com/</a>	Y	N	N
33. <a href="http://outoftheorthobox.com/">http://outoftheorthobox.com/</a>	Y	Y	?
34. <a href="https://orthofeminist.wordpress.com/">https://orthofeminist.wordpress.com/</a>	Y	Y	N
35. <a href="http://www.lipstickandbrisket.com/">http://www.lipstickandbrisket.com/</a>	Y	Y (Started 2015)	?
36. <a href="https://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/">https://lifeinthemarriedlane.com/</a>	Y	Y	Y
37. <a href="http://chbagi.blogspot.co.uk/">http://chbagi.blogspot.co.uk/</a>	Y	N	Y